

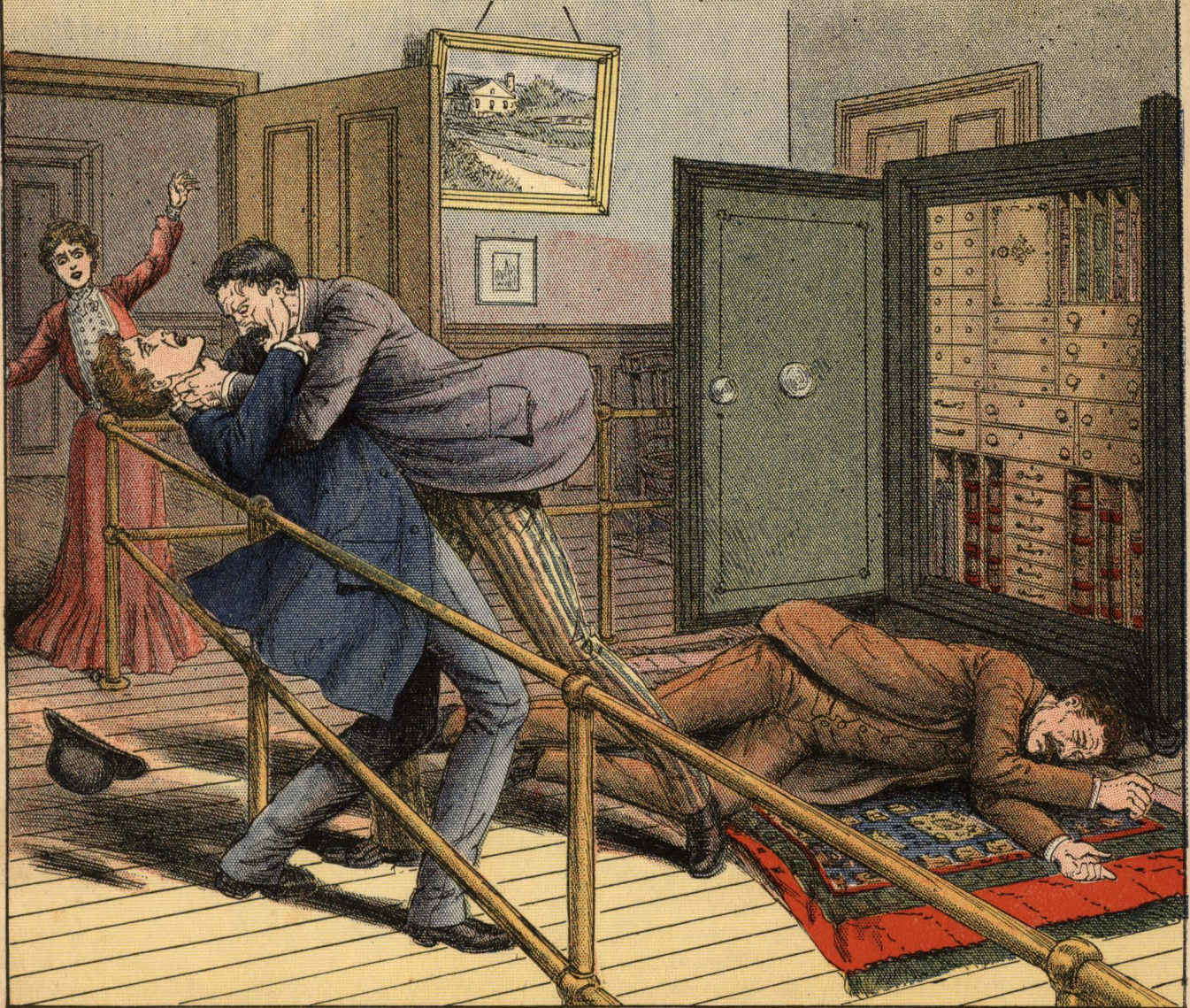
№ 3

5 CENTS.

FAME AND FORTUNE. WEEKLY.

STORIES OF BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY.

A CORNER IN CORN; OR, HOW A CHICAGO BOY DID THE TRICK. *By A SELF-MADE MAN.*



The boy, encumbered by his light overcoat, was at a disadvantage. The book-keeper was strong, agile and desperate. They swayed to and fro, within the brass railings, near the safe, Vyce trying to get a grip on Vance's throat.

Fame and Fortune Weekly

STORIES OF BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY

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A Corner in Corn;

OR,

HOW A CHICAGO BOY DID THE TRICK.

By A SELF-MADE MAN.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE ROOKERY BUILDING.

"Has Vance returned yet?" asked Jared Whitmore, a stout, florid-complexioned man of sixty-five, opening the door of his private office and glancing into the outside room.

"No, sir," replied Edgar Vyce, his bookkeeper and office manager—a tall, saturnine-looking man, who had been in his employ several years.

"Send him in as soon as he comes back."

The bookkeeper nodded carelessly and resumed his writing.

"Miss Brown," said Jared to his stenographer and typewriter, a very pretty brown-eyed girl of seventeen, the only other occupant of the room, whose desk stood close to one of the windows overlooking La Salle Street.

She immediately left her machine and followed her employer into the inner sanctum.

Mr. Whitmore was a well-known speculator, one of the shrewdest and most successful operators on the Chicago Board of Trade.

He owned some of the best business sites in the city, and his ground rents brought him in many thousands a year.

Accounted a millionaire many times over, no one could with any degree of certainty say exactly what he was worth.

His plainly furnished office was on an upper floor of the Rookery Building.

He did business for nobody but himself. Jarboe, Willcutt & Co., whose offices were on the ground floor of the Board of Trade Building, were his brokers.

The office clock chimed the hour of five as the bookkeeper, with a frown, laid down his pen, rested his elbow on the corner of his tall desk and glanced down into the busy thoroughfare.

At that moment the office door opened and a messenger boy entered.

Mr. Vyce came to the railing and received an envelope addressed to himself.

He signed for it, tore it open, read the contents, which were brief, with a corrugated brow, and then, with much deliberation, tore the paper into fine particles and tossed them into the waste-basket.

For a moment or two he paced up and down before his desk, with his hands thrust into his trousers pockets, and then resumed his work just as the door opened again and admitted a stalwart, good-looking lad, with a frank, alert countenance and a breezy manner, who entered briskly with a handful of pamphlets and papers.

"Mr. Whitmore wants you to report in his office at once, Thornton," said the bookkeeper, in a surly kind of voice,

accompanied with a look which plainly showed that he was not particularly well disposed toward the boy.

"All right," answered Vance, cheerily, turning toward the private office, on the door of which he knocked, and then entered on being told to come in.

"I hate him!" muttered Mr. Vyce, following the boy's retreating figure with a dark scowl. "He's a thorn in my path. He's altogether too thick with Whitmore. I can't understand what the old man sees in him. For the last three months I've noticed that my hold here is slipping away, and just when I need it the most. Just when things were coming my way, too. Now, with a fortune in sight, this boy is crowding me to the wall. Curse him! I can't understand what it means. Is it possible Whitmore suspects me? Pshaw! Am I not an old and trusted employee? I've always been in his confidence to a large extent, but of late he has been keeping things from me—matters I ought to know—especially in reference to this deal he has on. Those corn options are on the point of expiring, and I expected ere this to have been sent West to settle with the elevator people and get the receipts, for corn is on the rise and the old man is ahead at this stage of the game. I strongly suspect he means to corner the market this time. He's got the dust to attempt it with, and already he holds options on nearly half of the visible supply in Kansas and Nebraska, besides what he has stored here. There is no telling what he has been doing during the last thirty days, as not a word about corn has passed between us during that time. It's not like Whitmore to act this way with me. Something is up, and by George! I'll find out what it is."

Mr. Vyce drove his pen savagely into a little glass receptacle filled with small shot and turned to the window again, after glancing at the clock.

Bessie Brown came out of the inner office with her notebook in her hand and sat down at her machine to transcribe her notes.

In a few moments Mr. Vyce came over to her desk and, taking up his station where he could catch a glance of what she was writing, remarked:

"Are you working overtime to-night, Miss Brown?"

"Excuse me, Mr. Vyce," she said, covering the paper with her hands, "this is strictly confidential."

"I beg your pardon," he said, between his teeth, altering his position. "But you haven't answered my question."

"I expect to be busy until six," she replied, without looking at him.

"I have tickets for MeVickar's," he continued. "Would you honor me with your company there this evening? It is not necessary that you return home to dress. We can dine at Palmer's."

"You must excuse me," she replied, with a heightened color, "but I never go anywhere without my mother's knowledge and permission."

"But you went to the Auditorium two weeks ago with Thornton," he said, in a tone of chagrin.

"Mr. Thornton asked mamma if I could go, and she consented."

"You never invited me to call at your home, so I could become acquainted with your mother," persisted Mr. Vyce, who was evidently jealous of the intimacy which existed between Vance and the young lady.

Bessie said nothing to this, but applied herself more attentively to her work.

"Aren't you going to extend that privilege to me, Miss Brown?" he continued, fondling his heavy black mustache.

"Mr. Vyce, I am very busy just now," she replied, with some embarrassment.

The bookkeeper gave her a savage glance and then walked away without another word.

Much to her relief, he soon put on his hat and left the office abruptly, shutting the door with a slam.

At the same moment Vance came out of the private office and stepped up beside the pretty typewriter.

She looked up with a smile and did not offer to hide from his gaze the long typewritten letter on which she was engaged.

Evidently there was nothing there Vance ought not to know.

"Will you please turn on the light, Vance?" she asked, sweetly, her fingers never leaving the keys for a moment.

"Certainly, Bessie," he replied, with alacrity, raising his hand to the shaded electric bulb above her machine and turning the key, whereupon the slender wires burst into a white glow. "How much more have you to do?"

"Another page, almost," she answered, with another quick glance into his bright, eager young face.

"I won't be able to see you to the car to-night," he said, regretfully.

That was a pleasure the young man had for some time appropriated to himself and Bessie as willingly accorded.

"You are going to stay downtown, then, for a while?" she asked.

"Yes; I shall be here for an hour yet, perhaps. After supper I've got to meet Mr. Whitmore in his rooms at the Grand Pacific. I've got to notify mother of the fact by telephone."

Vance went over to the booth in the corner of the office and rang up a drug store in the vicinity of his home, on the North Side.

Outside the shades of night were beginning to fall.

From the windows of the office one could see directly up La Salle Street.

The cars, as they made the turn into or out of the street at the corner of Monroe, flashed their momentary glares of red and green lights, and filled the air continually with the jangle of their bells.

The sidewalks were filled with a dense crowd that poured out continually from the street entrances of the office buildings.

They streamed out of the brokers' offices and commission houses on either side of La Salle Street, and the tide set toward the upper end of the thoroughfare, where stood the girders and cables of the La Salle Street bridge.

Vance took all this in with a brief survey from the window, after he had sent his message across the river.

"What do you think?" said Bessie, as he paused once more beside her. "Mr. Vyce asked me to go to the theatre with him to-night. Hasn't he a cheek?"

"Of course you accepted?" said Vance with a grin.

"Of course I did no such thing," she answered, pausing for an instant in her work, as she looked up with an indignant flush on her creamy cheeks. "You know better than that, Vance. You just want to provoke me," with a charming pout.

"That's right," he answered, with a quiet chuckle, "but you mustn't mind me."

She smiled her forgiveness and went on with her work.

"There, that's done," she said, in a few moments, pushing back her chair. "I hope I haven't made any mistakes," as she rose to take the sheets into the inner office.

"No fear of that, I guess," said the boy, encouragingly. "You're about as accurate as they come, Bessie."

She paused on the threshold of the door to flash him back a look of appreciation for the compliment and then disappeared within.

Presently she returned and started to put on her things.

"It looks a little bit like rain, doesn't it?" she asked, glancing at the darkened sky, where not a star was visible.

"You can have my umbrella, if you wish," Vance offered, "but I guess it won't rain yet awhile."

"Never mind; I'll chance it. Good night, Vance."

"Good night, Bessie," and the outside door closed behind her.

Vance returned to his desk and proceeded to make copious extracts from a pile of pamphlets and reports he had taken from a closet.

In half an hour Mr. Whitmore came out of his sanctum with his hat on.

"You'd better go to supper now, Vance. Meet me promptly at eight o'clock at my rooms," he said, "and bring everything with you."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Whitmore left, and the lad, making a bundle of his notes and such papers as he knew were wanted by his employer, turned out the electric lights and locked up the office.

He didn't know it then, but this was the last time for many days he was to see the inside of the Rookery Building.

Nor did he dream of the tragedy that awaited his return to the office.

CHAPTER II.

BOUND WEST.

Vance went to a Clark Street restaurant and had supper. It was all right, but the boy did not enjoy it as much as he would have done at home.

The Thorntons lived in a small house, one of a row, on the North Side, which Mrs. Thornton owned.

They had once been wealthy, for Mr. Thornton had at one time been a successful member of the Chicago Board of Trade.

But a few months before his death, which had occurred

ten years previously, he had been caught in a short deal and squeezed.

He extricated himself at the cost of his entire fortune.

Everything was swept away except the one little house, the property of Mrs. Thornton, to which the family immediately moved, and a few thousand dollars banked in the wife's name.

After Mr. Thornton's death the widow devoted herself to her children, and when Vance graduated from the public school, she made application to Mr. Whitmore, with whom her husband had had business relations, for a position for her son in his office.

The application being made at a lucky moment, the lad was taken on, and had in every way proved himself worthy of Jared Whitmore's confidence.

Promptly at eight o'clock Vance was shown up to Mr. Whitmore's rooms in the Grand Pacific Hotel.

The corn operator was in his sitting-room before a table that was scattered over with papers and telegraph blanks.

It was a cool evening, but Jared Whitmore was in his shirt sleeves, and, although the windows were down at the top, his face was red and he was perspiring furiously.

A half-smoked cigar projected between his lips, and several discarded stumps lay on a lacquer tray that held one of the hotel pitchers of ice water.

"You have the government report on the visible supply in that bundle, have you?" asked Jared Whitmore, as soon as he became aware of the boy's presence in the room.

"Yes, sir."

"Let me have it," with an impatient gesture.

Vance had it before his employer in a twinkling.

"Your notes, please," said the operator, after he had studied the report for several minutes.

The boy laid them before him.

"Put the pamphlets down there. Now, take the evening paper and go over there by the window and sit down."

Vance did so, and there was perfect silence in the room for the next half hour, when it was broken by a knock on the door.

"See who that is," almost snapped Whitmore, jerking his thumb in the direction of the entrance.

Vance found a telegraph boy outside, signed for the yellow envelope and brought it to his employer.

Two more dispatches arrived before the little marble clock on the mantel chimed the hour of nine.

Another half hour of almost perfect silence ensued, during which two more cigar stumps were added to the collection on the dish; and Vance was beginning to wonder why he was being held there by Mr. Whitmore, when the operator rose from his seat, mopped his forehead with his familiar bandana handkerchief and then sat down again.

"Vance."

"Yes, sir," answered the boy, springing up.

"Come here."

The tones were short, sharp and incisive.

"Sit down here alongside of me."

Vance obeyed this order with military promptness.

"When can you start for Omaha?"

"Sir!" said the boy, almost speechless from amazement.

"I asked you when you could leave for Omaha?" repeated the operator, brusquely.

"By the eight o'clock train in the morning, if you particularly wish it," answered the astonished lad.

"Very well; make your arrangements to that effect. Now, Vance, I want to speak to you. Heretofore I have always closed my dealings with the elevator people through Mr. Vyce. For reasons which I need not discuss with you I am going to send you to do the business for me this time."

The boy's eyes expanded to the size of saucers at this information.

It simply meant a most remarkable expression of confidence on Mr. Whitmore's part in his youthful office assistant.

Confidence not only in the boy's business sagacity, but even more so in his integrity, for he would be obliged to handle checks signed in blank for a very large sum of money; just how large would, of course, depend on the amount of corn the options covered.

That it ran into several millions of bushels the lad already knew.

"I am taking this unusual course," continued Mr. Whitmore, lighting a fresh cigar and regarding Vance keenly, "for several reasons. To begin with, since I started this deal I have in hand I have met with opposition from a most unexpected quarter. It could only have developed through information furnished by some one who had an insight to my plans. In order to test the accuracy of my suspicions in a certain direction I cut off all information from that quarter. The result has been confusion in the ranks of the opposition. I'm, therefore, convinced I can at any time put my finger on the traitor to my interests. To continue the further development of my scheme, I have decided to substitute you for Mr. Vyce, so far as the settlement of my Western corn options are concerned. During the last five or six weeks you have probably noticed that I have employed you on business of a confidential nature. This was to test you for the purpose I had in view. On one occasion I so arranged matters that you were forced to retain in your possession over Sunday a very large sum of money. I had no doubts as to your honesty, but I wished to see how you would proceed under the responsibility. The result was perfectly satisfactory to me. Vance, I knew your father well. We had many business dealings, and I found him a man on whom I could implicitly rely. I believe you are his duplicate."

"Thank you, sir," said Vance, gratefully, as Mr. Whitmore paused for a moment.

"Now to business. Here is a power of attorney, which will give you all the necessary authority to represent me on this Western trip. Here are your general instructions," and he handed Vance the two typewritten pages Bessie Brown had executed just before she left the office for the night.

"You will go to Omaha first, thence to Kansas City, and so on. Here are letters of introduction addressed to the elevator firms. Some of them are personally acquainted

with me. These are the vouchers for the options. You will insist on all settlements at the figures given in the options, which, as you will see, are below the market quotations. Now, as to the payments of the balances, here is a small check-book of the Chicago National Bank. I have made out and signed sixteen checks in blank, one of each payable to the order of the elevator firm; all you will have to do is to fill in the amount after the difference has been computed. Immediately after each settlement you will mail me by registered letter, care of the Chicago National Bank, the firm's receipt for the amount of money represented by the check, together with the warehouse receipt. Now, read your instructions over carefully, and if there is anything you have to suggest, I will listen to you."

Vance went over the two-page letter and found that it covered every emergency, so far as he could see.

The boy was especially directed to visit certain out-of-the-way places, where elevators, reported as disused or empty, were known to exist, and to ascertain by every artifice in his power whether any corn had been received there for storage during the past three months. This was one of the most important objects of his journey.

"Here are a couple of hundred dollars to cover incidental expenses," said Mr. Whitmore, handing Vance a roll of bills. "I hardly need to tell you that I am reposing an almost unlimited confidence in your honor and business sagacity—a somewhat unusual thing to do with one so young as you. But I am rarely mistaken in my estimate of character, and I feel satisfied you will fill the bill to the letter. I may say right here that you have studied the corn market to advantage. Such details as I have asked you to look into for me you have gone over and reduced to practical results with astonishing clearness and dispatch for one of your years and limited experience with Board of Trade methods. You seem to be a born speculator, like your father. I have long wished to associate with me a young man of nerve and accurate foresight in whom I could thoroughly depend. You appear to combine all the qualities in question. On this trip you are bound to acquire knowledge of the most confidential nature—information that could not but seriously embarrass me if it became known to my business opponents. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Vance, with a serious face.

"You see how much I depend on your loyalty?"

"You need have no fear but I will fulfil your trust down to the smallest degree," answered Vance, earnestly.

"I am sure of it, Vance. The proof of the pudding is that I am sending you West on this business. One thing your age, and, I hope, your wit and cautiousness, are particularly adapted to, and that is acquiring the information about the possible contents of those elevators reported to be empty. On the thoroughness of your report as regards these properties will depend one of my most important moves on the corn market."

"I will find out the truth, if that be within the bounds of possibility."

"Now, Vance, another thing. Your mother will naturally want to know where you are going, but it will be

necessary for you to withhold that information, for I have an idea that as soon as your absence is noted at the office she will be approached on the subject by some one interested in tracing your movements. You will simply tell her you are going out of town on business for me and will be back in a few days. Do not write to any one in Chicago, not even your folks, while you are away. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Should you find it necessary to communicate with me at any time, call up Mr. Walcott, of the Chicago National Bank, on the long-distance telephone, and he will send for me."

"Very well, sir."

"I believe there is nothing further, so I will say good bye till I see you at the office after your return."

"Good-bye, sir."

Vance took up his hat, after carefully putting all the papers and the check-book of the Chicago National Bank in an inside pocket of his coat, and left the hotel.

When he reached home an hour later he duly astonished his mother and sister with the information that he was going out of town on business for his employer.

Of course the first thing they wanted to know was his destination.

"I am sorry, mother, I can't tell you. Where I am going, as well as the object of the trip, is a business secret."

"But we ought to know, Vance," expostulated his pretty sister Elsie. "Unless you tell us we shall be worried to death about you."

"Sorry, sis," he replied, taking her face in his two hands and kissing her cherry-red, pouting lips; "but I am under strict orders not to say a word about it."

"It's real mean of you. You know neither mamma nor I would say a word if you told us not to," she persisted, throwing her arms about his neck coaxingly.

"Don't blame me, Elsie—blame the boss. Let me tell you one thing, dear. I feel sure this trip is the chance of my life. Mr. Whitmore as good as said so."

And with that the gentle mother and loving sister had to be content.

Next morning Vance boarded a Pullman drawing-room car and left Chicago over the C. B. & Q. railroad for Omaha.

CHAPTER III.

TAKING UP THE OPTIONS.

Vance arrived at Omaha on the following morning and registered at the Great Western Hotel, where he had breakfast.

Then he went to the reading-room and looked over the papers, particularly noting the corn situation.

It was now time for him to be about his business.

He procured a large, oblong manilla envelope, in which he enclosed his letter of instruction, all but one of his letters of introduction, option vouchers and his check-book, and after removing a single specific check marked by

a perforated capital "A," he sealed up the package, addressed it to himself and deposited it in the hotel safe.

Then he sallied forth on the streets of Omaha.

The hotel clerk had directed him where to find the elevator buildings, which were located at various points along the river front.

He took a car to the nearest point and then inquired his way to the office of Flint, Peabody & Co., who controlled three of the elevators.

Their counting-room was in Elevator A.

"I should like to see Mr. Peabody," he said to a clerk who asked him his business.

"He is busy at present. Take a seat."

After waiting half an hour he was shown into the private office.

"Mr. Peabody?" asked Vance of a little, white-haired old gentleman seated at a mahogany desk alongside a window overlooking the Missouri river.

"Yes; what can I do for you?"

Vance handed him his card, in one corner of which was printed Jared Whitmore in small type.

"Mr. Thornton, eh?" exclaimed the busy head of the establishment, regarding him with some surprise as he sized him up from head to foot.

"Yes, sir."

"I've been expecting a representative of Mr. Whitmore, as those corn options expire at noon to-day. I am bound to say I looked for an older person than you. I presume you have a power of attorney to act for him?" said Mr. Peabody, holding out his hand.

Vance produced the paper, which the gentleman very carefully examined.

"How am I to know that you are really the person set forth in this document—that you are actually Mr. Whitmore's representative? It may be a forgery, and you may be acting for people opposed to that gentleman's interests," said Mr. Peabody sharply.

"I have a letter of introduction which ought to cover that point," answered Vance, promptly producing an envelope addressed to the person he was talking to.

"Hum!" said Mr. Peabody, glancing it over. "Seems to be all right. However, as his option is a large one covering grain in our three elevators, I've got to be careful. Excuse me a moment."

"Are you going to call up Mr. Whitmore?" asked Vance as the gentleman rose from his desk.

"Why do you ask?" asked Mr. Peabody abruptly, casting a suspicious look at the boy.

"Because, for business reasons he expressly desires that you should call up Mr. Walcott of the Chicago National Bank and ask for him. He does not want any communication at his office direct."

"Very well," replied the gentleman, who easily surmised Mr. Whitmore's reasons.

The elevator magnate entered a telephone booth at the end of the room and sat there a matter of fifteen minutes.

"I am satisfied that you are Mr. Whitmore's representative," he said as he reseated himself at his desk.

"Now, young man, we will talk business. Of course you don't expect me to close with you except at the market price?"

"I expect to settle with you at the price named in the option, less the amount paid to secure it," said Vance promptly.

"You ought to know that corn is several points above the figure stated in the option. We cannot close on those terms."

"Do I understand that you refuse to make a settlement of this transaction according to the terms of the option?" asked Vance, rising to his feet.

"Sit down, young man," said the elevator magnate. "You have the voucher for the option with you, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

"I should like to see it."

"You are prepared to redeem the option now, are you?" and Mr. Peabody glanced at the clock, which indicated close on to the noon hour.

"Yes, sir."

The gentleman considered the matter for several minutes, during which he cast penetrating looks at Vance's clear-cut, determined face.

"Does Mr. Whitmore propose to hold this corn in storage here?"

"I have no instructions as to its immediate removal," replied Vance; "that is all I can say."

"Very well. Have you Mr. Whitmore's check for the difference?"

"I have Mr. Whitmore's signed check, made out to your order, which I will hand you as soon as the amount has been computed."

"It is possible there will be a difference in our figures," said Mr. Peabody, with a grim smile.

"That's all right," replied Vance, briskly. "The amount has been left to me to fill in."

"Eh?" exclaimed Mr. Peabody, in a tone of surprise.

Vance repeated his remark.

"By George, young man, he seems to place implicit confidence in you!" and the head of the elevator firm once more looked Vance over, and with some curiosity.

Mr. Peabody, having decided to close up the transaction on the terms of the option, which he was legally bound to do, since Vance could not be bluffed into accepting less favorable ones, the differences were calculated, and the boy filled in the check designated as "A," requesting a receipt for the amount, which was immediately made out and handed to him.

Mr. Whitmore thus became the owner of something over a million bushels of corn stored in elevators A, B, and C.

This completed Vance's business in Omaha.

On his way back to the hotel he stopped at the post-office, and forwarded to his employer, in care of the Chicago National Bank, the receipt for the money covered by the check.

Then he went to dinner, after which he spent an hour viewing some of the sights of the western city.

At four o'clock he took a cab for the Union Depot, bought a ticket for Kansas City, and took his seat in a Pullman sleeper.

He arrived at his destination about midnight, drove to one of the principal hotels and went to bed, after taking the precaution to deposit his valuable papers in the office safe.

There were three different elevator firms he had to visit in this city.

He presented himself at the first at ten o'clock.

Here his youth was also unfavorably commented on in a transaction which involved 600,000 bushels of grain, and the head of the firm was inclined to hold off, until Vance insisted that he should communicate with his employer in Chicago.

Not being able to get Mr. Whitmore on the long-distance 'phone, Vance suggested that he call up Flint, Peabody & Co., of Omaha.

The gentleman, after some demur, consented to do this, being personally acquainted with Mr. Peabody, and the result of the confab was so satisfactory that Vance completed his business with him, getting a call on the corn, as the option did not expire until the next day.

At the offices of the other two elevators Vance had very little trouble, his power of attorney and letters of introduction being accepted without question, and no attempt being made to evade the terms of the option.

"That winds up this town," he said in a tone of satisfaction as he left the last place. "It is easier than I expected. Now for the postoffice."

He inquired the way there, purchased a stamped envelope, and sent off the three receipts by registered mail, according to his instructions.

"I've got lots of time now, as the next option at Grainville does not expire until Friday," he reflected as he took a car for his hotel. "Guess I'll take in a show to-night."

He reached the hotel in time for lunch.

While he was in the dining-room a smart, dapper-looking young man entered the hotel rotunda and walked briskly up to the office counter.

Taking possession of the registry book, he glanced rapidly over the day's arrivals.

His nervous finger-tips paused for an instant at Vance Thornton's name, which, in clear handwriting, stood almost at the top of the first page.

The young man noted the number of the room to which the boy had been assigned, and then glanced sharply at the numbered pigeon-holes where the room keys were deposited.

"He's here, all right," he muttered, as he turned away with a singular smile, "and is not in his room. He reached here early this morning, as his name is right under the date. He ought to be an easy proposition for Sadie to work. I must have those corn options and whatever warehouse receipts he has secured. Old Whitmore was pretty slick to send this young chap instead of Vyce, whom we depended on. But the old fox is up against a

crowd as slick as himself this time, and he's going to be squeezed good and hard."

Thus speaking to himself, the dapper young man pulled a cigar from his pocket, bit off the end, and lit it.

Then he walked over and seated himself in a chair that commanded a view of the office.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. GUY DUDLEY.

The dapper young man had almost finished his cigar when Vance came into the rotunda from the dining-room.

The stranger recognized the boy at once, which was not at all surprising, since he had met Vance probably fifty times in Chicago in the course of business.

"Why, hello, Thornton!" he exclaimed, walking briskly up to the lad and extending his hand in a cordial manner; "this is a surprise. What brings you out west, eh?"

"Mr. Dudley!" ejaculated Vance, somewhat taken back by the encounter.

The circumstance annoyed him greatly.

"Pshaw!" said the dapper gentleman, whose age might have been twenty-three. "Why the handle? I'm Guy to my friends, don't you know! Aren't you going to shake?"

Common politeness compelled Vance to accept the young man's hand, though it was with some reluctance.

"You're about the last chap I'd have thought of meeting out here in Kansas, 'pon my word," continued Dudley, volubly. "But I'm deuced glad to see you, all the same."

The reverse was the case with Vance, though of course he did not so express himself.

He was inclined to regard the meeting as unfortunate.

"I had no idea of seeing you here, either," said Vance, with no great enthusiasm.

"I s'pose not," said Dudley, showing his fine set of teeth with a sort of feline smile. "It's always the unexpected what happens, don't you know. Have a smoke?" and he offered Vance a cigar.

"Thank you, I don't smoke."

"Come over to the Criterion, then, and I'll blow you off," and Dudley grabbed him by the arm in a friendly way.

"You'll have to excuse me. I do not drink," replied Vance firmly.

"You don't mean it, do you?" said Dudley, clearly disappointed. "A fellow can't drink alone, don't you know? Take a soda or a sarsaparilla—anything, just to seem social."

The dapper young man did not appear inclined to be easily shaken off.

Vance hesitated, and Dudley, taking advantage of his momentary indecision, pressed him so strongly that the boy, not wishing to appear rude, agreed to accompany his undesirable acquaintance across the street to the swell establishment known as the Criterion.

"I've only just come to town," said Guy Dudley as they ranged up alongside the mahogany bar, rather an unusual experience for Vance, who never frequented such places

in Chicago. "You see, the governor, my father, you know, has a big interest in one of the flour mills out here, and as he couldn't come himself, he sent me to look after a matter of importance which affects his control of the business."

Vance nodded politely.

"I s'pose you're here on business connected with your boss, Whitmore, eh?"

The speaker's sharp eyes glinted curiously.

"What makes you think so?" asked Vance cautiously.

"Why, what else should bring you to Kansas City?"

"There might be several reasons other than what you suggested," said Vance, sparring for a valid excuse to throw Guy Dudley off the track. "My father had business interests here before he died which were never settled."

This was strictly a fact; though Vance knew very well that the matter at which he hinted was not in the slightest danger of ever being settled in his mother's favor at that late day.

"You don't say," replied Dudley, an incredulous smile curling his lips.

"As to Mr. Whitmore," added Vance, "my experience in his employ is that he is not accustomed to send a boy like me to execute important business."

"That's true," winked Dudley, putting down the glass he had just drained; "but then one can never tell just what Whitmore may do. He's as shrewd as they make them nowadays."

To this remark Vance made no answer.

"How long are you going to stay in town?" said Guy Dudley, changing the subject.

"I may leave to-morrow and I may not," replied his companion evasively.

"A short stay, eh? Well, you ought to make it a merry one. What are you going to do with yourself to-night?"

"I think I shall go to the theater," said Vance carelessly.

"Just what I was going to propose," said Dudley, with suppressed eagerness. "You must come with me. There is a good show at Hyde & Beaman's. S'pose we go there?"

Vance was rather taken aback at this proposition.

He was not a bit anxious to go with Guy Dudley under the circumstances.

But to refuse his invitation without some good reason was sure to give offence, and Vance always considered it a wise policy not to make an enemy if he could avoid doing so.

So he accepted Dudley's offer, much to the young man's inward satisfaction, and then pleaded a business engagement to get rid of him.

The dapper young man, having accomplished all that he wanted for the present, made no further effort to press his society on Vance, hinting that he also had business to attend to; as indeed he had, but not of the nature he would have his boy acquaintance believe.

So they parted at the entrance to the Criterion, Dudley promising to call for him at his hotel at about half-past seven that evening.

Kansas City, Kansas, is a wideawake, lively town, and Vance Thornton spent several hours that afternoon wandering about the principal streets, an interested observer of western progress.

Promptly at seven-thirty Guy Dudley presented himself at the hotel office and inquired for Vance Thornton.

"Are you Mr. Dudley?" asked the clerk.

"That's my name," said the dapper young man airily.

"You will find Mr. Thornton in the reading-room."

"Well, old man," said Dudley, tapping Vance on the shoulder, where he sat looking over the copy of a current magazine, "I see you're all ready and waiting. Just put on your coat and we'll trot along."

Vance donned his light overcoat and the pair left the hotel together.

"I s'pose you won't indulge even to the extent of a cigarette?" said Dudley, pulling out a silver case and tendering it to the lad. "No? All right; bad practice, I know, but it's one of my follies," he said lightly as he lit a match and applied a light to a gold-rimmed cylinder of Turkish tobacco. "When one has a quantity of wild oats to sow the quicker he puts 'em under the ground the better," he added with a laugh.

"You appear to be one of the boys," said Vance, for want of something better to say.

"Yes, I make it a point to see my share of life occasionally," the dapper young man admitted with a grin. "You don't go around much, do you?" with a slight sneer.

"No," said Vance with a shake of his head. "One needs to keep his wits clear in our line, and I don't see how that can be done if you stay up three-quarters of the night chasing the elephant."

"Pshaw! When a fellow wakes up in the morning feeling a bit rocky a dose of bromo-seltzer will fetch him around all right. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. If I didn't take a run out of a night with the boys once in awhile I wouldn't be worth shucks. You don't know what you lose, old chap. Still, you're young yet."

"I believe in enjoying myself in a rational manner," Mr. Dudley, said Vance. "Drinking and smoking and billiards and card-playing don't quite fall in with my idea of a good time."

"All right," remarked Dudley carelessly; "every one to his taste. Well, here we are," and he turned in at the entrance to Hyde & Beaman's theater, followed by Vance.

Dudley had secured good seats in the orchestra, and as the performance was above the average Vance thoroughly enjoyed it.

"You don't object to having a bite, do you?" asked Guy Dudley after the show.

"I don't usually eat late at night," replied Vance, "but I have no objection to joining you. Where will we go?"

"There's a famous English chop-house on Blank street," said the dapper young man, with a glint of satisfaction in his eyes; "we'll take a cab and go there."

"Why wouldn't the place over the way do as well?" asked the boy. "It looks to be a first-class restaurant."

"So it is, but it isn't on a par with Bagley's. They have a fine grill-room there, and though the bill of fare is limited, it's English from A to Z. I guess you've never been in one of those establishments."

"I don't think I have," admitted the boy.

"Then it will be my pleasure to introduce you to something worth while. Hi, there!" beckoning to a cab driver who sat muffled up on his box.

"Get in," to Vance as the jehu sprang down and opened the cab door, and the boy allowed the accomplished Mr. Dudley to push him into the vehicle. "Bagley's on Blank street," said the dapper young man to the driver, and a moment later they were on their way to that notorious Kansas City resort.

Fifteen minutes later the cab drew up before the entrance to Bagley's, a dingy looking building situated in a narrow alley off one of the business thoroughfares.

Vance had expected to see a brilliantly lighted establishment, with big plate glass windows and every sign of a high-toned restaurant.

The contrary was the case.

Not even a sign distinguished Bagley's place from that of the other buildings in the vicinity, though a red light suspended over the door served to indicate that it had other uses than those of an ordinary dwelling.

A light rain was now falling, and before the boy had time to ask his companion if some mistake had not been made in the place Dudley opened the door and pushed him inside.

CHAPTER V.

THE PLOT THAT FAILED.

Vance found himself in a narrow, dimly-lighted hallway.

But before the sense of disappointment, not unmixed, perhaps, with a feeling of uneasiness, had time to assert itself, Dudley brushed by him and opened a door which admitted them to a long, low-ceiled room, painted a dull, smoky color, but brilliantly illuminated with many gas jets enclosed in colored globes, which threw a subdued and fantastic glow about the room.

There was a kitchen in the rear and a bar along one side near the door.

The rest of the room was taken up with round, well-polished mahogany tables of different sizes, for large or small parties.

It was a restaurant all right, but entirely different from anything Vance had ever before visited.

The tone of the place was wholly English, as Dudley had intimated to his companion, and the bill of fare was limited to broiled meats and fish, fowl, oysters and rarebits.

The place was chiefly noted for its fine old English ales.

For all that, Bagley's was a notorious place.

Its frequenters were mostly crooks, gamblers and politicians.

Curiosity and its famous cuisine, however, brought thither a sprinkling of the better classes—men about town,

salesmen and their out-of-town customers, lawyers, brokers, merchants, and the sons of rich parents who thought it the correct thing to be seen there.

The upper floors were divided into supper rooms for ladies and their escorts, and it was quite a fad among the upper crust of Kansas City aristocracy to drop in there after the theater.

Mr. Bagley himself, rotund and red-faced, lounged in a big easy chair behind the cashier's desk near the entrance.

The room was nearly crowded at that hour, and while Vance was surveying the place with much interest a waiter approached Dudley and handed him a card.

"We'll go upstairs, Vance," said the dapper gentleman gaily. "I'll introduce you to a friend of mine."

Thus speaking, he hooked his arm in Thornton's and, preceded by the waiter, they passed out again into the entry and walked up a couple of flights of richly-carpeted stairs, down to the end of a corridor, where a window opened on a gloomy prospect of dark roofs and irregular black voids.

The waiter rapped on one of the doors that lined this corridor, and a voice shouted, "Come in."

The attendant stepped aside and permitted Dudley to usher Vance into a well-lighted room and the presence of a dark-complexioned gentleman in full evening dress and a young lady of unquestioned beauty, that was heightened by her chic air.

They had just been served with supper, the chief dish being grilled bones.

There were bottles of wine and ale on the table, and the couple seemed to be enjoying themselves hugely.

"Hello, Dudley! You're just in time. You'll have supper with us, of course—you and your friend. Waiter, take the order."

"Sure," responded the dapper young man; then, turning to the lady, whom he evidently knew, he said, "Miss Miller, this is Vance Thornton."

The young lady bowed with a sweet smile and a fascinating glance.

"Carrington," continued Dudley, turning to the gentleman, "let me make you acquainted with my friend Thornton. Vance, this is Sid Carrington."

"Glad to know you, Thornton," said Carrington, rising and extending his hand.

The boy acknowledged both introductions in a suitable manner and then took the seat pointed out to him, which was close to Miss Miller.

"Vance, like myself, is merely paying a flying visit to Kansas City on business," explained Dudley, and then he and Carrington began to talk together, leaving the boy and Miss Miller to entertain themselves.

There was nothing backward about Miss Miller, for after Vance had given a modest order to the attendant she proceeded at once to make herself agreeable to the lad.

"So you're a stranger in Kansas City, Mr. Thornton? Are you from Chicago?"

"Yes," replied Vance, who was not a little impressed by the lady's loveliness, as well as her fascinating ways.

"Chicago is a most delightful city," she exclaimed gushingly. "I lived there for many years myself. The young men of Chicago are so bright and manly; it is really a pleasure to meet one of them way out here," and she flashed such a look at Vance as almost took his breath away.

During the twenty minutes the newcomers had to wait to be served the lady ate but little, but she talked and laughed enough to make up the difference.

Every little charm she possessed she threw into her conversation, and she made many adroit inquiries of Vance as to when he left Chicago, where he had been before he came to Kansas City, where he expected to go next and when, what his business was, and many other suggestive queries, all of which the boy parried skilfully or replied to as he thought prudent, though he had not the slightest suspicion that the lady had any other object than mere womanly curiosity in asking them.

An acute observer would probably have noticed that she was not entirely pleased with the result when the conversation became general.

An almost imperceptible signal passed between her and Sid Carrington when that gentleman finally favored her with a significant look of inquiry.

He understood at once, and made a remark to Dudley in a low tone, at which the dapper young man shrugged his shoulders.

"What do you drink, Thornton?" asked Carrington as the waiter stood by expectantly. "You can have anything you want, but this house is particularly noted for its imported ales. I'll order a bottle for you."

"I'm sorry," Vance hastened to say, "but I really don't drink anything."

"What!" exclaimed Sid, a slight cloud forming on his brow, while Miss Miller looked up in great surprise.

"That's right," interposed Dudley. "He doesn't touch anything in that line. I found that out to-day at the Criterion. You'll take coffee, however, won't you, Vance?"

Vance nodded.

"A bottle of your XXX ale, waiter, and a cup of coffee for this gentleman," said Guy Dudley briskly.

The attendant bowed and departed.

"So you really don't drink?" said Miss Miller with an artful smile. "This is quite a surprise to me, for I thought every gentleman indulged in something or other. Now, couldn't I prevail on you to take just a thimbleful of this light Madeira? As a special favor, with me, you know?"

She favored Vance with an arch look as she filled two small wineglasses with the amber liquid, as if to imply it was an honor she was especially according him.

"Really, Miss Miller——" protested Vance, feeling much embarrassed.

"You will oblige me, won't you?"

She placed one of the glasses close to his fingers and raised the other toward her ruby lips, with a look so seductive as to be almost irresistible.

Vance was confused at his position and somewhat be-

wildered by the coquettish and persistent attitude of the fair lady at his elbow.

He felt, without actually seeing, that the eyes of the two gentlemen were fixed upon him at that moment.

As his fingers grasped the slender stem of the wine-glass and he half drew it toward him, a gleam of unholy triumph seemed to dart from three pairs of eyes.

But their satisfaction was premature.

Suddenly before Vance's vision passed the face of his gentle, white-haired mother in Chicago, whom he had promised faithfully that he would never drink a drop of intoxicating liquor.

He drew back his hand.

His muscles tightened, and he looked his fair tempter squarely in the face as he said:

"I regret I cannot oblige you, Miss Miller; but I promised my mother I would not drink, and it is impossible that I can go back on my word."

Vance Thornton was himself again.

Sadie Miller had not found him such an easy proposition after all.

A look of chagrin rested for a moment on the lady's face, while Sid Carrington uttered a strong invective under his breath.

But the affair was instantly passed off with a laugh, and the boy found himself once more at his ease.

The coffee for Vance and the ale for Dudley presently arrived, and then another slight signal was made by the host which the girl understood.

The conspirators were about to play their last card.

In the most natural way imaginable Dudley attracted Vance's attention for a moment, and the boy half turned away from Miss Miller.

During that instant she leaned slightly forward, extended her arm and dropped something into the coffee.

It was all done in a moment, and when Vance turned again to the young lady she was in the act of drinking from her own glass of Madeira.

He drank the coffee at intervals as he polished off a grilled bone, quite unsuspecting that he had fallen into the snare at last.

The effects of the drug became evident to the watchful eyes of the three conspirators before Vance began to realize there was anything the matter with him.

At length he experienced the insidious feeling of heaviness and torpor characteristic of a dose of chloral or knock-out drops.

"Hadn't we better—go?" he blurted out in a thick, hesitating tone to Dudley, who was talking to Carrington.

"What for? There's no hurry. We'll all go together presently," was the reply of the dapper young man.

Vance looked helplessly at Miss Miller, his eyes, hitherto so alert and bright, now half closed and dull.

He half rose in his chair with a muttered exclamation, sank back, swayed a bit to and fro, and then utterly collapsed.

"He's safe!" cried Carrington with sudden energy, ris-

ing to his feet. "Quick, Dudley; see if he has the papers on him, and secure them before the waiter turns up."

In an instant Vance's treacherous companion was searching him with a swiftness called forth by the urgency of the occasion.

But pocket after pocket failed to yield the desired results.

The option vouchers not yet presented for settlement, and such warehouse receipts as the boy was supposed to have about his person, were not to be found.

In fact, not a document of any kind relating to his trip was in evidence.

"Curse the luck!" exclaimed Carrington, who appeared to be engineering the conspiracy. "We're euchred after all! What has he done with them?"

Miss Miller, who had been watching the abortive efforts of Guy Dudley with a slight curl on her pretty lips, now spoke.

"Evidently the boy is smarter than you have given him credit for," she said with a tantalizing laugh. "I suspected it almost from the start. Why, he didn't give a single thing away the whole time I was doing my best to pump him. You'll have to try something else, Sid, if you expect to reach results."

Just then the waiter appeared at the door with the bill.

"What's the number of your cab, Dudley?" asked Carrington as he handed the attendant a bill.

"No. 206."

"Call up 206 and 93, waiter, and then you'll have to help us get our friend here to the walk. Your coffee has been too much for him."

CHAPTER VI.

ELEVATORVILLE.

Vance woke up next morning with a severe headache.

He was in bed in his room at the hotel.

His thinking powers were somewhat mixed, and he wondered what had occurred to him.

"I don't recollect coming to bed," he muttered in a perplexed tone. "Where was I last night?"

He did not even remember that he had been to the theater.

After lying motionless in bed a good fifteen minutes staring at the ceiling he gave the problem up for a bad job.

"What time is it, anyway?"

"Gee! Nearly ten o'clock! I'll have to hustle if I am going to get any breakfast in this house to-day. Something is wrong with me, that's sure. I never felt this way before."

He began to dress, and then gave his face and head a good sousing, which made him feel better.

"I look as if I had been out with the boys all night," he said, observing his bloodshot eyes and pallid expression. "I'd give something to know what has knocked me out."

He did not feel hungry, but he believed a cup of coffee would do him good.

On his way from the elevator to the dining-room he stopped at the office and asked the clerk if he had any idea when he came in last evening.

"You'll have to see the night man about that," replied the spruce young man with a quizzical smile. "Been having a good time, I suppose. Better get a bromo-seltzer before you eat. Step into the drug store, right through the corridor, and he'll fix you up all right."

Vance thought the clerk's advice was good and he followed it, after which he went into breakfast.

It was not long before the events of the preceding evening began to fashion themselves in his brain, and the situation dawned upon him.

"But I didn't drink anything at that place," he persisted to himself, "that is, nothing but a cup of coffee. Perhaps strong coffee at midnight doesn't agree with me, as I'm not used to it. All the same, it's funny I don't remember a thing about how the affair wound up, or how I got back and into my bed upstairs."

The reflection annoyed him a good bit.

"That Miss Miller is a fine looking girl, all right," he mused, trying to devote his attention to the morning's report about the corn market; "I don't think I ever met such an attractive person. Still, I think I prefer Bessie. And the chap that was with her—I forget his name—he seems to be a pretty swell party. Seems to me I've seen him before. If I have, of course it was in Chicago. I wonder if Dudley will be around looking for me this morning? I don't fancy him much, although he certainly treated me away up in G. I'm sorry on the whole I met him, for if he returns to town before me he'll probably mention that he met me out here, and that's just what Mr. Whitmore doesn't want. If it should get about that I was on a night racket with him it's bound to hurt me. I guess I'd better cut Dudley out by taking an early train for Grainville."

As this seemed to be good policy, Vance hastened to settle with the hotel people, and having found that he could get a train for his destination at 1:30 p. m., he snatched a hasty lunch, hired a cab, and reached the station in plenty of time to board the through accommodation.

Arrived at Grainville, he went to the best hotel in town and registered, depositing his documents, as usual, in the office safe.

Next morning he visited the two elevator concerns he had to do business with, settled the differences without trouble, and took a call on the grain, sending his vouchers off to Chicago in the usual way.

From there he went to other important grain centers in Kansas, where the balance of his options were to be settled, closing up that part of the business finally in Jayville, Missouri.

"There, that winds up the option business," he remarked with an air of relief as he registered the last of his vouchers for Chicago.

Consulting his letter of instructions, he found that he had to proceed to a town called Elevatorville, on the Mississippi, facing the State of Kentucky.

The branch railroad that connected the place with the nearest trunk line was a rocky affair, and had fallen into

the hands of a receiver owing to a default in the interest on its first mortgage bonds.

Evidently transportation business had fallen off badly in that section.

Vance made cautious inquiries at the junction as to whether much grain had passed over the branch road lately, but nobody seemed to know anything about the matter.

The regular station agent was sick in bed, and the substitute assured Vance that there was nothing doing in that line.

The boy took the late afternoon train for Elevatorville, arriving at the town long after dark.

A solitary, worn-out hotel 'bus was backed up against the station platform.

Vance, grip in hand, was stepping over to take it, when it suddenly struck him that perhaps he had better not go to the hotel.

If he could obtain accommodation at some house in the suburbs his presence in the place would probably attract less attention.

There might be nothing in it after all, but he proposed to omit no precaution having a bearing on his secret mission.

So he asked a husky looking boy he noticed standing around if he knew of any place in the vicinity where he could find board and lodging for a few days.

"I'll show you a place, mister."

The country boy took him around to an unpretentious cottage, where he secured what he wanted at very reasonable terms.

Feeling that some excuse was in order, he explained to the elderly spinster who owned the house that he thought Elevatorville might improve his health.

"You don't look a bit sick," she ventured, looking him over with critical consideration.

"That's right, madam; but you can't always tell by appearances," replied Vance with a politeness that quite charmed her.

"True," she answered. "I remember my niece Mary Ann looked the very picture of health when she came here to visit me, and before she was here a week she took down sick with liver complaint and nearly died."

"Just so, madam," said Vance, with an amused smile.

"I hope you won't be sick, young man," she continued anxiously; "but if you should be, I can recommend my nephew, who is the best doctor in town."

"I'll bear your relative in mind if I should need his services," replied the boy, stifling a grin.

"I s'pose you feel kind of hungry, don't you? Come by the train, didn't you?"

Vance admitted that he could eat a trifle if she would be so good as to prepare something.

"The fire is out, but I can light it up again. I can't promise you any delicacies, but we don't stint ourselves. I'm right glad to get a boarder these hard times, and will make you feel at home. It's a wonder you didn't go right

to the hotel, though if you can't afford it you've done right to come here."

If the lady was surprised at Vance's healthy appetite, she discreetly made no reference to it, beyond remarking that she was glad to see he enjoyed the meal.

Vance was up early next morning, and after a satisfactory breakfast sallied out on a tour of observation.

The place wore a dormant air, a surprising fact for a western river town.

Vance judged that it had been struck by a temporary setback of some sort, which happened to be the fact.

The boy saw the outlines of five big elevator buildings in the distance down by the river, and he strolled over in that direction.

He avoided the main business streets, going toward the great Mississippi by a roundabout way that brought him to the river bank a mile above the objects that he aimed at.

He smiled to himself at the idea of taking so much trouble, which in the end might prove to have been time spent to no purpose; but when he drew near to the doorway leading to the office of the first elevator he suddenly came to a different conclusion.

For there, sunning himself on an inverted cask outside of the entrance, he spied a familiar figure.

A quick glance at the person's face enabled Vance to identify him.

It was the dapper young Chicagoian, Guy Dudley, as large as life.

CHAPTER VII.

THE REASON WHY VANCE THORNTON WAS TICKLED ALMOST TO DEATH.

"What the dickens is he doing in Elevatorville?" ejaculated Vance in great astonishment. "I thought he was attending to business for his father in Kansas City."

Just then a man in a sack-coat and wearing a smart-looking fedora hat came to the door and entered into conversation with Dudley.

Presently the dapper young man jumped off his perch, and the two began to walk toward the spot where Vance stood regarding them with some curiosity.

"It will never do for him to see me here," muttered the boy, backing out of view and then walking rapidly down a path that led to that end of the elevator which faced the water. "He'd ask no end of embarrassing questions which I never could answer."

When Vance reached the corner of the elevator building he found that further progress in that direction was blocked by the water, unless he chose to crawl over the damp sand under the ground floor of the edifice, which was raised several feet on spiles.

So he concluded to wait where he was until the coast was clear again.

He looked back to see if Dudley and his companion were continuing on up the street, but to his dismay he saw they also had turned into the path leading down to the river end of the building.

There was nothing now but to get out of sight under the corner of the elevator and wait for them to retire.

"How long do you expect to stay in this burg, Mr. Dudley?" the man in the fedora hat was saying as the pair came within earshot of Vance's post of concealment.

"Give it up," returned the dapper young man, with a yawn. "It's precious dull here, all right; but I've got to stick here until I find out whether that Thornton chap"—at these words Vance pricked up his ears and was instantly on the alert—"is coming down here on a reconnoitering expedition for his boss, old man Whitmore, or not. Those are my orders, and I got them right from the shoulder, too."

"What makes you think he is coming here?" asked the elevator man curiously.

"We have our reasons," replied Dudley significantly, "and we're not taking any chances. I'm watching every train that comes in."

"I didn't see you at the depot last night."

"I don't have to go to the depot. He'll go to the hotel as sure as guns, or to the Stag House."

"Or to the Parker House," suggested the man in the fedora.

"Scarcely there. He's got plenty of money and will want the best that is to be had. However, I don't care where he goes; the moment he registers at any of these places I shall be informed."

"Well?" said the other interrogatively.

"Then I'll point him out to you, and it will be up to you to see that he's blocked at every point."

"As every one of our men down here has been fixed, I don't think he'll find out a heap," remarked the elevator official in a tone of conviction.

"However, there's nothing like making assurance doubly sure, Mr. Taggart," said Dudley, taking out his cigarette case. "Have a smoke?"

"Thanks," and his companion helped himself to one.

"The whole trouble seems to have developed from the fact that our ally, Vyce—that's old Whitmore's book-keeper—has come under the suspicion of his employer, though it isn't likely anything can be brought against him. When the combination was forming Carrington found out Vyce could be bought. He had his price—most everybody has—and an arrangement was effected by which he was to keep the opposition pool informed of Whitmore's operations in this new deal of his as far as he was able to find them out."

"That was a great advantage," said Mr. Taggart, wagging his head sagaciously.

"Well, say, you've no idea what it counts for. Whitmore has been dominating the bull clique for years. All sorts of jobs have been put up to him, but he has managed to wriggle out somehow. This time we believe it is his object to corner the market, and the combination which is after his scalp is backed by one of the strongest banks in Chicago. I fancy it is strong enough to squeeze him. If we should catch him we'll wring him bone-dry. We'll bankrupt him as sure as my name is Guy Dudley."

The dapper young man lit another cigarette and continued:

"As I was saying, Vyce, our source of information on the inside, has suddenly dried up. Whitmore hasn't accused him of any underhanded dealings, but the very fact that he has shut up tighter than a clam toward his confidential assistant, and has sent young Thornton—a mere boy, you might say—west to close up his corn options, is a sure sign that the old man is suspicious of Vyce. Ever since that boy left Chicago we have reason to suspect that Whitmore has been quietly buying every bushel of corn that is offered, though his regular brokers do not appear in these transactions. If this is a fact, he must own more than half of the visible supply on the market."

"He must have a barrel of money."

"I'd be satisfied with half of what I could raise on his real estate. It was a slick and farseeing move on the part of the pool to sneak five million bushels down here without the fact getting out. That was accomplished early in the game by working our pull with the Mississippi Transportation Co. Nothing like having an influential director or two at your back."

The man in the fedora hat nodded.

"These elevators have been duly reported out of business for one reason or another."

"I can't see how you managed to keep the papers in the dark. What they can't ferret out isn't worth knowing."

Guy Dudley laughed sardonically.

"The combination simply bought up half a dozen of the leading papers, and own them body and soul. They print only what we want on the corn question. They mold public opinion, as it were. The other papers copy our news, and there you are—see?"

Mr. Taggart thought he saw, for he rubbed his hands and laughed.

"But in dealing with such an artful old fox as Jared Whitmore we have to provide against the unusual and the unexpected. It was distinctly unusual for him to send a boy like Vance Thornton to close up his options—yet that is what he has done, and we should never have got on to it if it had not been for the uncommon shrewdness of our man Vyce. If he has done this, there is no reason why he hasn't instructed the boy to come down here after he has finished with the options and try to find out whether the press reports concerning these elevators are really founded on facts, or whether they have been cooked up by the opposition forces."

"And do you think that young fellow Thornton is smart enough for such a slick job as that?" asked Mr. Taggart, with a sneer.

"Do I? Well, say, he's all right, and don't you make any mistake on that head," said Dudley in a convincing tone as he gave the rim of his hat a flip backward. "Carrington says he's smart enough to be dangerous, and Carrington is no fool."

"Yet he's only a boy, you say?" said Mr. Taggart, skeptically.

"That's all right. He was clever enough to block a

little game we put up on him in Kansas City, and he didn't even suspect our intentions, either."

"How was that?" asked Mr. Taggart, with some interest.

"Carrington came down himself from Chicago to help the thing along, and brought one of his handsomest lady stenographers along to pump the boy dry. And she did it, too; oh, yes, she did it—nit! And we thought he would be such an easy proposition. We wanted to find out all his plans and get possession of the options we supposed he carried about in his clothes."

"And you failed, eh?"

"We failed all right. He didn't have as much as a toothpick about him, and so, after dosing his coffee, for he doesn't drink a drop of liquor, we had all our trouble for nothing. The girl went into a spasm of admiration over Thornton's cleverness in being prepared for the unexpected, while Carrington was madder than a whole nest of hornets. I took him to his hotel and put him to bed, and that's the last I've seen of him."

"Well, now, you hear me," said the man in the fedora hat, thumping the side of the bunch of spiles behind which Vance was listening to this enlightening conversation, "if he comes down here and gets away with a grain of information as big as one grain of those five million bushels stored in these five elevators, I'll give you leave to kick me from here to the mouth of the Mississippi."

The remark was emphatic and forcible, and there was not the slightest doubt that Mr. Taggart meant every word of it, yet is it any wonder that Vance Thornton, under the circumstances, grinned as he had never grinned before in all his life?

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MAN FROM THE WEST.

If Guy Dudley and Mr. Taggart, the manager of the five elevators of Elevatorville, only suspected the injury they had inflicted on their cause by coming down to the water's edge of that particular elevator under which Vance Thornton happened to be concealed at the time, and there telling all they knew to the winds, as they thought, there is not the least doubt that they would have felt like going to some quiet place and kicking themselves off the earth.

The dapper Mr. Dudley thought himself as smart as they make them in Chicago, but really he had lots to learn.

He was satisfied that young Thornton could not poke his nose into the town without he (Dudley) becoming immediately aware of the fact.

Yet Vance had already been more than twelve hours in Elevatorville without the dapper young man's knowledge, and had practically accomplished the object of his visit through the indiscreet loquacity of the gentlemen who were "laying" for him.

The only really good thing that Dudley had been guilty of was his admission of Thornton's cleverness.

Dudley and the manager of the elevators, having unwittingly put Vance Thornton in possession of more information even than he had expected to pick up in that

western river town, walked back the way they had come and parted at the corner of the street, the dapper young man returning to his hotel.

"Well," murmured Vance, as he emerged from his place of concealment, "if this hasn't been the greatest piece of luck I've ever heard tell of, I don't know what luck is. So there's actually five million bushels of corn in these elevators, while they are officially reported as empty? I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Taggart, for the information," and he looked after the retreating figures of the manager and his companion. "So that was a put-up job on me at Bagley's chop-house, eh? And I never dreamed of it. At last I am on to you, Mr. Guy Dudley, and I think you've done all the damage you're likely to do to Mr. Whitmore. And our respectable bookkeeper, Mr. Edgar Vyce, is a snake in the grass. I'll have to lose no time in putting Mr. Whitmore next to all these important facts. When he learns the real state of affairs I guess Mr. Vyce will have to join the opposition in person as well as in spirit. I never did like him much, and now I certainly despise him. A sneak and a traitor ought always to be handled without gloves."

By this time the road was clear for Vance to retire without attracting special attention to himself, and half an hour later he was seated at a table in the cottage writing a letter to his employer.

That afternoon he left Elevatorville by a river boat that carried him a few miles up the Mississippi to another town that boasted of a pair of dismantled elevators.

He had no difficulty in personally examining these buildings, and found that the newspaper report as to their condition was strictly true.

Vance added a postscript to his letter, setting forth the facts as he had found them, and then forwarded it by registered mail, as usual.

"I suppose Guy Dudley is watching for the train to deposit me in Elevatorville this evening," he grinned as he sat on the hotel veranda after supper. "Gee! It was a lucky thought of mine not to go to the hotel last night. Had I done so my name would probably have been mud, so far as finding out what I came for, and then I should never have found out those other little matters. It's better to be born lucky than rich."

Next morning Vance left for a railway junction town in Missouri, the last point he had on his list.

It is unnecessary to go into the particulars of his business at this place.

It is enough to say that it had a direct bearing on his employer's plans, and the boy managed to obtain all the necessary information to be got.

"Now for Chicago and home," said Vance, in a happy frame of mind, after he had boiled down his statistics in a succinct letter to Mr. Whitmore and sent it off.

The boy uttered these words as he was coming out of the postoffice, which was located on the corner of two streets.

Immediately preceding him was a tall and commanding man, with a swarthy complexion and black eyes.

Vance had noticed him inside posting a letter.

He wore a soft felt hat of generous proportions, and his manner was the free and easy way of the wide west.

The boy stopped and watched him with some curiosity as he started to cross the street.

At that moment a noisy racket arose around the corner, and there suddenly came into view a team of horses attached to a heavy wagon of produce.

Evidently the animals were frightened, and were dashing about in a blind, purposeless race.

The stranger was right in their path, and seeing his peril, he sprang back.

But in some unaccountable way he missed his footing, slipped and fell upon the roadway.

A dozen or more people besides Vance noticed his mishap, but only the boy seemed to have presence of mind enough to take any action.

The frenzied horses were almost upon the fallen man when Vance, darting out from the sidewalk, seized the near animal by the bridle-rein, as well as getting a secure grip on the harness with the other hand, and succeeded in slightly veering the team out of its course.

Of course he was instantly carried off his feet and placed in an exceedingly dangerous situation, but he had accomplished his object.

The wheels of the heavy wagon barely grazed the stranger's head as it flew by, but he was saved—saved by Vance's remarkable nerve and quick movements.

The runaways, handicapped by his weight, and headed off by several men who now jumped into the roadway and waved their coats and hats, lost their speed and were presently brought to a standstill.

"Young man," exclaimed a broad-shouldered Missourian, grasping Vance by the hand, as with crumpled clothes and minus his hat he let go his hold and staggered back from the restive and trembling horses, "that was one of the pluckiest things I reckon I've seen for a long time."

"That's what it was, so help me Bob!" cried another demonstrative individual, pressing himself to the fore. "Shake, youngster!"

A crowd quickly gathered around the boy, and everybody wanted to take him by the hand and tell him what they thought of his feat.

"Here's your hat!" cried some one on the outskirts of the circle.

Half a dozen willing hands were extended to grasp and restore it to its owner.

It was really extraordinary what an interest the on-lookers had suddenly taken in the Chicago boy.

"Oh, come now," objected Vance, trying to disengage himself from his well-meaning admirers, "I'm really much obliged to you; but I think you might let a fellow go now."

"But you've got to drink with us before we can let you part company," cried one officious six-foot native.

"You must excuse me," said Vance, moving off, "but I don't drink."

"You don't drink!" exclaimed several of the men in a

breath, falling back at what seemed to them a most unheard-of statement. "Did you say that you didn't drink?"

"That's exactly what I did say, and I generally mean what I say," answered the boy in a firm tone.

As Vance elbowed his way clear of the mob every one looked at him with the same curiosity they might have bestowed upon some new and extraordinary animal which had unexpectedly dropped in among them.

A fellow that did not drink was decidedly something out of the common in Missouri.

Vance, however, was rescued from this disagreeable situation by the man whose life he had saved.

The big fellow stepped up, and linking his arm with the lad's, drew him off down the street, saying, in a very pleasant and somewhat musical voice:

"Let us get away from this mob, my young friend; I fancy their well-meant intentions are not particularly agreeable to either of us. I can see that you don't care to be made a hero of, though I never knew one who more deserved the honor."

He spoke in such a breezy, whole-souled way that Vance was instantly prepossessed in his favor.

Though he showed the flavor of the untrammelled West in every movement, yet there was nothing rough about him.

He was a gentleman from heel to crown.

"I am very glad you were not injured by the runaway, sir," said Vance sincerely.

"Thanks to your nerve and presence of mind, I was not; but I had a narrow call for my life. I owe my preservation to you, my brave lad, and I wish you to understand that I am deeply grateful to you. You must let me know your name, for I insist that we shall be better acquainted."

"My name is Vance Thornton."

"Thank you; and mine is William Bradhurst."

"I am pleased to know you, Mr. Bradhurst," said Vance heartily.

"Not more than I am to know you," replied the man from the West. "You are a stranger to this town, I should judge."

"Yes, sir; I am from Chicago."

"You interest me. I am bound for that city myself. I expect to take the afternoon train for St. Louis, to connect with the Panhandle road."

"I intend to leave to-day for Chicago by the same route," said Vance, pleased with the prospect of having so agreeable a companion.

"I am delighted to hear it, my dear fellow," answered the westerner, in a tone which indicated his satisfaction.

"We will go together, if you have no objection."

"I shall be glad to have your society," assented the boy.

"Good. I was wondering how I would relieve the monotony of the trip. You have settled the manner in the way I should have preferred."

By this time they were several blocks from the scene of their thrilling adventure.

"Where are you stopping?" asked the big fellow.

"At the Planters' House."

"Why, that's where I have put up. If you don't mind we'll go there now. It is nearly lunch hour. Anyhow, I'd like to have a talk with you."

To this invitation Vance offered no objection, and ten minutes later they were ascending the hotel elevator together.

CHAPTER IX.

DAME FORTUNE TAKES VANCE THORNTON UNDER HER WING.

"Well, Thornton, I trust that you and I will be good friends," said Mr. Bradhurst, as he motioned Vance to a seat by the window after they had entered one of the best suites of rooms in the house.

"I hope so, sir," replied the boy in a cheery tone, which indicated that he saw no reason, at least on his part, why they should not.

"It isn't every one that I take a fancy to," said the broad-shouldered man; "but I am bound to say that, even apart from the natural friendliness I feel toward one to whom I am so largely indebted as yourself, I have taken a liking to you on general principles."

"You are very kind to say so," returned Vance; "I can say the same thing as regards yourself."

"Then we appear to be mutually pleased," said Bradhurst with a breezy laugh. "The fact of the matter is, young man, I have lived for the last eight years in a sort of rough-and-ready community, where a man's character comes to the surface without much effort on his part to hold it down. We soon learn to size up those with whom we are thrown into contact, and sift the honest fellow from the worthless scamp."

"You have lived in the mining districts, I suppose?"

"You've hit it right at the first guess, though I hardly suppose I resemble a cowboy."

"No," said Vance; "still, you could easily be taken for a prosperous ranch owner, or something of that sort."

"That's right enough, too. I don't look much as though I was afflicted with consumption, do I?" asked Bradhurst, with a smile.

"Why, no," replied the boy in a tone of surprise.

"Well, eight years ago, a few years after I graduated from Yale College and was beginning the life of a business man in New York, my friends came to the conclusion that I was marked for an early grave. I had the disease, all right, so the doctors I consulted said, and was treated for it; but I went from bad to worse, until it seemed only a question of time when I was expected to step out. As a last resort I was advised to give up everything and go to Colorado. Well, I went."

"And coming West cured you?"

"I don't fancy so; it was the new life I lived. I kept away from large towns and went into the wilderness. I lived out in the open air. I bought a horse and rode about a great deal. After awhile I found my strength returning and my chest expanding, and in two years I could afford to laugh at doctors."

"And you never had a return of the old symptoms?"

"Never. I think it is perfectly safe for me to return to civilization again."

"It must give you a great deal of satisfaction to know that you have cheated the undertaker out of a job," said Vance with a laugh.

"I leave you to judge of that. But while it was solely for the purpose of recruiting my health I came West, I have also accomplished another satisfactory result."

"And what is that?"

"I have made a fortune—and a mighty big one at that."

"In eight years?"

"In six years. If you have fortune on your side a good deal of money can be picked up in the wild and woolly districts, as they are sometimes called."

"I have often heard so," admitted Vance interestedly.

"I was always interested in metallurgy, and studied the subject pretty exhaustively before I had any idea of putting my knowledge to practical use. While wandering about at my own sweet will I used to do a little prospecting for the fun of the thing, but I can't say that I met with any success. My luck began when I took up my habitation in the Dead Man's Creek mining district, Colorado. By that time I had grown tired of doing nothing. I was induced to buy an interest in a claim that at first looked to be a good thing, but soon petered out. Still, my mining information encouraged me to believe there was a future in it. I bought my partners out for a trivial sum, and from that moment superintended the working of the mine myself. One day we struck a fine pay streak, and when the news circulated I was beset with offers from promoters who came there to examine into it. I refused to sell, but was finally persuaded to form a company, and dispose of a few shares at a high figure. That was four years ago. The mine turned out to be a real bonanza, and my profits from the ore taken out up to a month ago have been over \$2,000,000."

"Gee!" exclaimed Vance, opening his eyes; "you don't say!"

"I continued to hold ninety per cent of the stock, and this I disposed of a little over a week ago for the par value of \$100 a share to a clique of wealthy men. I realized \$9,000,000."

"Nine millions!" gasped Vance, who was astonished at the sum, although he was accustomed to move in a business atmosphere where transactions involving millions were a common occurrence.

"Exactly—nine millions," nodded Bradhurst, enjoying his young acquaintance's amazement. "So you see you saved the life of a man actually worth \$11,000,000 in cash and securities. If my head had been smashed by that truck those millions would have had no further interest for me. While every man's life is presumed to be his most precious possession, mine has more than a usual value."

"I should think it had," said the boy, regarding his new friend with a fresh interest.

"Under these circumstances, Thornton, you will understand that if I presented you with a couple of millions in consideration of what you have done for me I shouldn't

be doing any too much to express my gratitude, and I should still have more money on my hands than I could ever reasonably hope to spend."

"I hope you don't think of doing such a foolish thing as that," said Vance, not a little disturbed at the mere idea of being presented with such an enormous sum.

Perhaps the average person would have entertained different views on the subject, but then Vance Thornton was young, and had imbibed the idea that a man ought to earn in a legitimate way all that he acquires.

He had full confidence in his own powers to accumulate a million or two within the next few years, as soon as he got well in harness.

Perhaps he was right.

Many a young man has been ruined, not only financially, but morally, by getting next to a fortune without the necessity of earning it.

Mr. Bradhurst possibly neglected to think of that side of the question, for he said, with a smile:

"Why not?"

"Because I wouldn't accept what I haven't earned," replied the boy stoutly.

The western man regarded him with an amused smile.

All the same, he began to look upon the lad with a new and increased respect.

"Well," he said in an altered tone, "we'll defer the discussion of such a thing to another time. As a matter of fact, my life, which you have presented to me, I may say, is worth more than two millions. In fact, it is quite beyond any financial value. Will you permit me to bestow on you in return for it a lifelong friendship?"

There was no doubting the feeling which actuated those words.

"I shall be only too glad to accept that," replied Vance, his strong, young face lighting up with pleasure.

"It's a bargain," said Bradhurst, extending his hand. "Shake on it."

Vance grasped his big brown hand, and with that hand-clasp the glittering goddess of fortune hovered for an instant over the boy's head and touched him with the point of one of her golden wings.

"I hope I haven't talked you to death, Thornton," said the man from the golden West, rising and slapping the lad familiarly on the back; "but as it is lunch hour, I think we may as well go down to the dining-room and have a bite."

"I second the motion," laughed Vance, getting on his feet.

"The motion having been duly made and seconded, I declare it carried, and this meeting stands adjourned pro tempore."

CHAPTER X.

STRUCK DOWN.

Vance Thornton and his new friend William Bradhurst, the many-times millionaire, expected to reach Chicago over the P. C. C. and St. L. railroad at about seven o'clock

on the morning following their departure from the Missouri junction town.

Their calculations were correct, and the train was entering the Union Depot, corner of Adams and Canal streets, when Jared Whitmore, after a visit to the Chicago National Bank, where he had received and perused Vance's last letter, mailed after his departure from Elevatorville, was ascending to his office in the Rookery building.

Bessie Brown looked up as Mr. Whitmore entered the outer office, so also did Mr. Vyce, the bookkeeper.

Both noticed that their employer looked unusually stern.

The assistant bookkeeper was out attending to matters that usually fell to Vance to transact.

Without looking either to the right or left, Mr. Whitmore entered his private room.

Presently Bessie's electric alarm buzzed, and she hastened into the boss' sanctum.

In a few minutes she returned to her machine, copied a short letter addressed to Jarboe, Willicutt & Co., locked up her notebook and proceeded to put on her hat, an unusual circumstance at that hour.

"Are you going out, Miss Brown?" inquired Mr. Vyce in some surprise.

"Yes, sir," answered Bessie coldly.

"Rather early for lunch, is it not?" he asked, coming to the end of his desk and regarding her movements curiously.

"I am not going to lunch."

"Then you are going out on business for Mr. Whitmore, I take it?"

Bessie made no answer, but having got her hat on straight, she deliberately walked to the outer door and passed into the corridor.

"You seem to be putting on a whole lot of airs with me, young lady," snarled the bookkeeper to the empty office; "all of a sudden, too. You haven't spoken a civil word to me since that young cub Thornton went away on confidential business for the old man. I shall make it my business to take you down a peg or two. If I am not mistaken in my calculations, you'll be looking for a new job before long, Bessie Brown—you and that young imp, curse him! If I can keep you both out of the financial district you may depend upon my exertions to that effect."

At that moment his alarm went off, and sticking his pen into the rack, he walked into the private office.

"Sit down, Mr. Vyce," said the big corn operator curtly. "You have been in my employ a matter of six years, I think?"

"About that time," replied the bookkeeper, rather taken back by the question, which bore a fatally significant bearing.

"During the last three years you have enjoyed a considerable degree of my confidence, which has, if anything, increased since the first of the year. How have you returned this trust I reposed in you, sir?"

"How, sir?" faltered the bookkeeper, his guilty conscience flying into his sallow face. "Why——"

"Mr. Vyce, for some weeks past I have had reason to believe that some one conversant with certain plans of mine was giving information to the clique that is opposing me in the market. You are the only one to whom I have opened my lips in this office. I have long regarded you as my right-hand man—a man I thought I could trust."

"Is it possible that you accuse me, Mr. Whitmore?" asked the bookkeeper, with an injured air.

"I do accuse you, Mr. Vyce, of playing the part of traitor to my interests," said the corn operator sternly.

"But, sir, unless you have some proof it is unfair——"

"I have the words of a certain Mr. Guy Dudley as evidence that you sold yourself to the pool headed by Jarrett, Palmer & Carrington."

At the mention of Dudley's name Mr. Vyce turned as pale as death.

"Guy Dudley!" he exclaimed in a trembling voice. "Why, how could you have seen him? He is not in Chicago."

"I know that," replied the operator sharply. "Perhaps you can inform me where he is, since you and he appear to be hand in glove."

"As you have not seen him, how can you say you have his evidence——"

"We will not argue that point. But if you are curious to know how I obtained my information, I will say that a confidential messenger of mine ran across your friend Dudley and heard from that gentleman's lips enough to convict you of the charge I bring against you. If you have anything to say in your defence that your conscience would advise you to bring forward I will listen to you, otherwise I will have to ask you to bring your connection with this office to an immediate close."

"You wish me to understand that you have received this information through Vance Thornton?" asked Mr. Vyce, with compressed lips and lowering brow.

"I have mentioned no name."

"But you sent him out West."

"How do you know that?" asked Mr. Whitmore curtly.

"He has been absent from the office for some ten days, and as those options of yours were on the point of expiring, I supposed——"

"Isn't it a fact that you advised Mr. Sidney Carrington at once of Vance's absence from this office, and suggested your idea of his destination and purpose? And don't you know that Mr. Carrington, Mr. Dudley, and a woman connected with their office, went to Kansas City for the express purpose of blocking the boy's mission by getting possession of my options by foul means?"

"As you seem predisposed to my guilt, I see no use in making any answer to your questions. I wish you to understand that I brand your informant—whether he be Vance Thornton, as I believe, or somebody else—as a liar."

Mr. Vyce rose to his feet and walked out of the private room.

He was furious with suppressed passion.

Mr. Whitmore followed him out almost immediately.

and went to the office safe, where he proceeded to unlock a special compartment to which he only had access.

Edgar Vyce watched him with set white face and venomous eyes.

Suddenly an evil suggestion entered his soul and took lodgment there.

He knew that documents of the greatest moment in connection with the corn market were deposited in that inner safe.

If he could only get possession of them he could make his own terms with the pool in whose interests he had practically lost his position.

If he could get possession of them!

There was nobody in the office at that moment but he and Mr. Whitmore.

Suppose—

For a moment the blood congealed around his heart, and he clutched at the desk to support himself.

The corn operator was about to relock the steel door.

It was now or never if he was to do anything.

Without waiting for the fiendish suggestion to cool he seized a heavy ruler and, with a muttered imprecation, sprang at the operator from behind.

Mr. Whitmore heard him and gave a startled glance backward.

But he was at the infuriated man's mercy.

Thud!

The ruler descended on the old operator's head, and he went down on the carpet like a stricken ox at the shambles.

At that identical instant Vance Thornton, dusty and travel-stained, appeared at the office door.

He was a witness of the murderous attack.

With a cry of horror he sprang forward to aid his now insensible employer.

"You here!" cried Vyce, turning on him with the rage and despair of a man detected in the commission of a desperate crime. "You shall never live to tell the story."

In a moment they had grappled in a terrible struggle.

The boy, encumbered by his light overcoat, was at a disadvantage.

The bookkeeper was strong, agile and desperate.

They swayed to and fro within the brass railings near the safe, Vyce trying to get a grip on Vance's throat.

At length the bookkeeper succeeded in tripping Thornton so that he fell across the railing, and then he began to pound the boy over the head and face with his fist.

The result was now no longer in doubt, for Vyce clearly had the upper hand.

He intended to kill the lad, for he hated him as only such a malignant nature can hate.

But fate willed it otherwise, else this story would not have been written.

The outer door suddenly opened, and Bessie Brown appeared in the opening.

With dilated eyes she looked a moment on the scene.

She recognized Vance Thornton and the awful situation he was in.

Uttering a piercing scream that echoed through the cor-

ridors, Bessie seized the first thing that came to her hand, which happened to be a cane forgotten by a morning visitor, and jumped to Vance's assistance.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CORN SITUATION.

The appearance of Bessie on the scene altered the state of affairs materially.

Vyce realized that the scales had turned against him, and that if he expected to evade the consequences of his rash actions he had not a moment to lose.

With a bitter curse he cast the half-stunned boy from him, grabbed his hat and coat, and started for the door.

Vance had fallen to the floor, and Bessie, paying no further attention to the bookkeeper, ran to the boy, and lifting his head in her arms, begged him to speak to her.

As Vyce passed hurriedly out into the corridor he brushed against two clerks from an adjacent office, who had been attracted to the spot by the girl's scream.

Before he reached the stairway he ran against others.

In fact, the entire floor had by this time been alarmed, and a score of men were hurrying toward Mr. Whitmore's office.

"What's the excitement about, Mr. Vyce?" asked the elevator boy as the bookkeeper pushed himself into the descending cage, which had stopped at his signal.

"An accident has happened to Mr. Whitmore," he answered in a hoarse voice. "I'm going for a doctor."

By this ruse he managed to effect his escape from the building.

In the meantime, while the office was filling with excited people anxious to find out what had occurred, Vance gradually recovered himself.

As soon as he could sit up Bessie got him a glass of water, which he swallowed greedily.

Then he got on his feet.

"Thanks, Bessie; I feel all right now. Don't crowd in here, gentlemen," he said, waving back the mob.

"What's happened to Mr. Whitmore?" asked a stout broker, peering over the railing at the unconscious corn operator.

"He's been hurt," answered Vance. "I'd be obliged to you, Mr. Bradley, if you will come inside and help me get him into his private office."

At that moment the assistant bookkeeper returned, and was, of course, astonished to see such a crowd and commotion in the place.

"You back, Vance?" he ejaculated. "What's occurred here?"

"Trouble," replied the boy shortly. "Go out and fetch a doctor for Mr. Whitmore. I'm afraid he's seriously injured."

Vance and the stout broker having carried the corn operator into his sanctum, they, with Bessie's help, tried to bring the insensible man to consciousness.

"Looks as if he had been struck by some heavy, blunt instrument," remarked Broker Bradley, examining the jagged wound on Mr. Whitmore's skull.

"He was hit with the heavy office ruler," said Vance soberly.

"Indeed!" exclaimed the broker in surprise. "How did that happen?"

"I will tell you, but for the present I hope you will let it go no further."

In the fewest words possible the boy told him what he had seen as he entered the office; also how he had been attacked by Vyce, and but for Bessie's arrival would probably have been fatally injured.

"The scoundrel! He must have been crazy!"

"Not at all," replied Vance. "I can easily understand how it came about; but for the present it is better I should say nothing on the subject. Mr. Whitmore will know how to deal with him when he recovers."

"The police ought to be notified. I don't like the looks of Mr. Whitmore. He is a long time coming to."

"We shall have a physician here soon," said Vance.

"He breathes very hard," said Bessie anxiously.

She had been bathing the operator's face and chafing his temples and hands with no satisfactory results.

In a few minutes the assistant bookkeeper appeared with a doctor, who was immediately taken into the private office.

Vance took advantage of this opportunity to clear the outer office of those drawn there by curiosity and other reasons.

He restored the ruler to its original position, locked the private compartment of the safe and put the key in his pocket.

Then he returned to the private room in time to see his employer sit up with some difficulty.

The physician looked serious, as if he did not like the aspect of the case.

"He had better be removed to his home at once and his regular doctor sent for. His condition will not bear trifling with."

Mr. Whitmore's eyes rested on Vance.

He beckoned him to his side.

"I am thankful you are back," he whispered with great difficulty. "I'm afraid I'm in a bad way. I've been struck down at a critical moment. I depend on you to look after the office. See my brokers. All my important papers are in the inner compartment of the safe. Write an order that I empower you to act for me until further notice and I will sign it."

"Don't lose a moment in doing it, young man," said Broker Bradley, who was supporting the stricken corn operator. "He seems to be growing weak fast."

Vance drew up the paper, which was signed with great trouble by Mr. Whitmore and witnessed by Broker Bradley and Bessie.

"Now the check-book," he gasped feebly. "I will sign in blank. Fill it up by and bye with the amount of my entire balance at the Chicago National."

"He has wonderful confidence in you, Thornton," Mr. Bradley said, in great astonishment.

But the check was fated never to be signed.

As the pen was placed between the old corn operator's fluttering fingers he uttered a sudden groan, his head fell back, and he became unconscious once more.

In this state he was taken home.

Under these considerations Vance saw that the responsibility of notifying the police rested on him.

Accordingly, he visited headquarters and interviewed the chief of police.

Detectives were at once furnished with an accurate description of Edgar Vyce and despatched to hunt him up and arrest him.

Vance then visited the offices of Jarboe, Willicutt & Co., in the Board of Trade building, and explained the situation.

Mr. Jarboe, the head of the firm, was very much concerned over the news.

"The affair will be printed in all the afternoon papers and will certainly have a bad effect on the market. With Mr. Whitmore down and out the Jarrett, Palmer & Carrington crowd will have a clean sweep. In which case Mr. Whitmore's losses will be immense. It is very bad, very bad indeed," said Mr. Jarboe, shaking his head dismally.

"I have authority to act for Mr. Whitmore," said Vance, producing the paper which had been signed by the stricken corn operator.

"That's all right as far as it goes," said Mr. Jarboe. "It gives you the right to act for Mr. Whitmore, but what can you do without money, even supposing you to be capable of intelligent action on the big interests involved?"

"You are right, Mr. Jarboe; I'm afraid my hands are tied. Mr. Whitmore intended to transfer his Chicago National balance to me by check, but he lapsed into insensibility at the critical moment."

"Is that really the fact?" asked the senior partner, looking his astonishment.

"Mr. George Bradley was present when Mr. Whitmore asked for his check-book and expressed his intention."

"Well," said the broker, "such a mark of confidence in your honesty and business capacity is remarkable. It is true I have lately heard him speak about you in terms of the greatest praise, but—however, it is useless to discuss the matter. He was prevented from signing the check, you say, so you cannot touch a cent of Mr. Whitmore's money, even if your handling of that money would save him from ruin."

"True," admitted Vance dejectedly.

"I will have to consult with my partners as to what is best to be done under the circumstances," said Mr. Jarboe, "and will advise you as soon as possible. We recognize your authority in the premises, and of course can make no move unless authorized by you in writing."

"The bear pool will certainly try to break the market," said Vance.

"Undoubtedly. Corn is high, and, but for this unfortunate affair, likely to go higher. Mr. Whitmore's holdings have dominated the market and controlled the price. He has stood ready to buy every bushel offered. Probably

half the visible supply of corn stored in the Kansas and Nebraska elevators is owned by him—a fact you should be familiar with, as you have just been out in that part of the county in his interest. Jarrett, Palmer & Carrington most likely have a quantity of grain which they have been holding back for a coup. Mr. Whitmore has suspected its existence, but has failed to discover any evidence to prove the fact. All reports point to the contrary supposition."

"I have thrown a little light on that point, Mr. Jarboe," said Vance.

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. Whitmore directed me to investigate the true state of the corn situation at Elevatorville, Missouri."

"Well?"

"There are five elevators in that place. They have been reported out of business temporarily."

"So I understand. Are they not?"

"Possibly they may be," replied Vance, "but all the same Jarrett, Palmer & Carrington have five million bushels of corn stored in them at this moment."

"Five million bushels?" almost gasped Mr. Jarboe.

"Yes, sir—five million bushels."

"If this is the fact," said Mr. Jarboe, greatly excited, "we are beaten to a standstill. Without money we cannot take a dollar of that corn which the pool will throw on the market at once, now they have learned of Mr. Whitmore's misfortune. Thornton, as sure as you sit there, there will be a panic in the corn pit to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER XII.

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE.

Vance returned to the Rookery Building in a very depressed state of mind.

His interview with Mr. Jarboe seemed to indicate that nothing short of absolute ruin now faced his employer—the old man who at that moment lay at his home almost at the point of death.

The afternoon papers contained an account of Mr. Whitmore's misfortune, and hinted at its probable bearing on the next day's corn market.

Several reporters were waiting to interview Vance on his return.

To these gentlemen he was courteous but extremely reticent.

He insisted that the published reports were grossly exaggerated, and put as bright a complexion on the situation as he could.

But he was up against the fact that other reporters had visited Mr. Whitmore's residence and had learned that his condition was critical.

"Poor Mr. Whitmore," said Bessie, with tears in her eyes, "it is awful to think he may never recover from that cruel blow."

"Perhaps it will be as well he does not," said Vance gloomily.

"Why, Vance!" exclaimed Bessie in unfeigned surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, Bessie, that his absence from the office at this time spells ruin in capital letters."

"But he has put you in charge of everything," said Bessie, whose confidence in Vance's abilities was supreme.

"But I can't do a thing without money. I should need a great deal of money."

"He intended to sign a check for you," she said, "but——"

"Exactly, but he was unable to do it."

"Why couldn't I go to his house," she said suddenly. "He may have recovered his senses. Give me the check-book. If the thing is possible I will get his signature and bring it back to you."

"Bessie, you're an angel!" cried Vance, his face lighting up with a new hope. "What a chump I am not to have thought of that! The fact of the matter is, Mr. Jarboe's view of the situation knocked me endwise. I ought to go myself instead of sending you, but I have lots to do here, and I guess you'll do as well."

So Bessie took the check-book and started for Michigan avenue, on the South Side.

While she was absent Vance brought all of his employer's documents relating to corn matters from the safe to the inner office, and sat down to study them in connection with printed reports and other sources of information he found on Mr. Whitmore's desk.

It was nearly dark when Bessie returned.

Vance saw at once from her face that she had failed in her mission.

"You did not get his signature?" he said anxiously.

She shook her head sadly.

"It is feared by his physicians that Mr. Whitmore may die before morning," she said. "He has not recovered consciousness at any time since he was taken home. I left the check-book, after explaining matters to Mrs. Whitmore, and she said if he regains his senses she will try to get her husband to sign."

"Thank you, Bessie," replied Vance gratefully. "You have done all that I could have done myself under the circumstances. I have been studying the situation, and feel confident if I had enough money I could save Mr. Whitmore. Unless I get it before business opens on the Board of Trade in the morning I fear it will be too late."

There was a painful silence for some moments.

"I am glad you have returned, Vance," said Bessie at length. "I don't know what I should have done under these conditions had you still been away. I think I should have gone home at once and stayed there."

"It would have been harder for you, I suppose. I hope we shall always be such good friends, Bessie," said the boy earnestly.

"I'm sure there is no reason why we should not be," she replied. "Now you must tell me where you have been, unless, of course, it's a business secret."

"I have been West on important business for Mr. Whitmore. As soon as I get the chance I will tell you a good many interesting particulars of my trip. It is time now that you went home for the day."

"Why, how did you get that scar on your forehead?" she asked, laying her fingers gently on a small abrasion of the skin.

"That," he replied, with a little laugh; "oh, I got that down in Missouri yesterday morning while butting in against a runaway team. I saved a man's life and made a good friend. His name is William Bradhurst, and he's a millionaire eleven times over. He—why, by George!"

Vance stopped and stared at the girl.

"Eleven millions!" he muttered. "Eleven millions in cash and securities, that's what he said."

"Vance, what are you talking about?" asked Bessie nervously.

"Eleven million dollars! Why, Great Caesar! If I could induce him to back me up, with Mr. Whitmore's enormous corn holdings I should win out. Mr. Whitmore would be saved financially, while Bradhurst himself would almost double his capital, for if we cornered the market—and with the start the boss has made we ought to be able to do it—we could surely control the price. We could easily buy up every bushel of that five million at Elevatorville. That would keep that lot from being moved to Chicago until we chose to have it put in motion. With scarcely any corn in transport the market would soar to—good gracious I dare not think of it. I haven't a moment to lose. I must see Mr. Bradhurst at once."

And Vance, for the first time in his life utterly ignoring Bessie, rushed for his hat.

"Vance—Vance!" she cried, running after him. "You haven't gone crazy, have you?"

"Crazy!" he cried almost fiercely, turning full upon her. "Yes, I have! I'm crazy—crazy with a scheme that means millions to us. Go home. I can't see you to the car. I've got to go to the Grand Pacific on business."

"Vance!" and then Bessie broke down.

"Why, what are you crying about?" he said with an abruptness unusual with him.

"Because (sob) you are so (sob) rough with me."

He looked at her a moment without speaking, and then seemed to realize how he had been acting.

"Forgive me, Bessie, for making you cry; but I've thought of a plan by which I hope to save Mr. Whitmore, and perhaps corner the market as he had started out to do. If I put it through—there, I'm so excited over the bare idea you must excuse me saying anything more. Everything depends on my finding Mr. Bradhurst at his hotel to-night, so you see I mustn't delay a moment. There, I wouldn't offend you for the world," he continued, as he led her out of the office and locked the door; and then, as she turned her tear-stained face before him in mute forgiveness, he quite forgot himself and actually kissed her.

"Oh, Vance!" she exclaimed, blushing violently.

It is possible the boy was somewhat astonished at his own audacity, but, if the truth must be told, he was not a bit repentant, and would have repeated the performance if he had dared.

Twenty minutes later Vance was in Bradhurst's apartments in the Grand Pacific Hotel, talking with a purpose

and earnestness which he had never before displayed in his life.

Bradhurst had been looking about him for something in the line of business that would engage his attention, for the mere idea of spending his wealth simply to amuse himself by leading a life of ease was extremely distasteful to him.

He was a man of active habits and a busy brain, and the boy's plan, which Vance laid down with convincing directness, appealed to his fancy.

"Come over to the office, Mr. Bradhurst, and I will show you the documents and the proofs. I can there better explain what has been done, what our position is to-night, and what we shall be able to accomplish. I have been studying Board of Trade methods ever since I entered Mr. Whitmore's office. With the grasp on the market I have at this moment, through my employer's holdings, I see my way clear, with your backing to corner the product and force the price to almost any figure within reason. In a week the Jarrett, Palmer & Carrington pool won't have a leg to stand on."

"All right; I'll go over with you, Vance. But before we go we're going to have dinner. You look as though you needed a square meal."

"I've scarcely had a bite all day," admitted the boy; "but I don't feel hungry at that."

"That's because you're all worked up over this matter and the unfortunate affair at your office. Take a wash and we'll go down to the dining-room."

The clock in Mr. Whitmore's office struck the hour of midnight when the conference between Vance and William Bradhurst came to an end.

"If for no other reason than because I owe you a good turn I'll see you through this, my boy," said the big man cheerfully. "But in addition to that, I see the opportunity for both of us to make a million or more easily."

"You are risking the money, Mr. Bradhurst, and the profits over and above the figure at which corn closed to-day will rightfully be yours. I am satisfied to save Mr. Whitmore's interest as it now stands."

"Vance Thornton, I am backing your information and experience with my money. It is a fair partnership. If we win out the profits are to be evenly divided, do you understand? Only on that condition will I go in."

"But," almost gasped the boy, "the profits may run into—"

"Millions. Exactly. In which case you will be a millionaire at eighteen. Do you object?"

The boy was too much stunned at the prospect to reply.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHO HOLDS THE ACE?

Rats, they say, will leave a sinking ship.

Perhaps it would hardly be fair to compare the solid brokerage firm of Jarboe, Willcutt & Co. with the rodents in question, but Tennyson Jarboe, after his interview with Vance Thornton and a careful study of Mr. Whitmore's condition from the latest reports in the evening papers,

decided, in consultation with his partners, that Jared Whitmore was as good as done for, both physically and financially.

With five million bushels of corn ready to be shipped to Chicago at their nod, it was reasonable to expect that the Jarrett, Palmer & Carrington clique would jump into the pit the next morning and, with little opposition to fear, hammer the market to pieces.

In the ensuing panic corn would tumble like the famous Humpty Dumpty of fairy fiction, and it therefore behooved Jarboe, Willicutt & Co., with the pointer they had got from Vance, to sell a million or so bushels short for their own private account.

It would be perfectly fair, since Mr. Whitmore's boyish representative could do nothing toward stemming the current without money.

So when Vance Thornton reached Mr. Whitmore's office on the following morning he found a letter addressed to himself and signed by Mr. Jarboe, in which that gentleman expressed his regret that the firm saw no way of saving their old customer from the expected crash unless something tangible in the way of money was forthcoming, and as this seemed to be out of the question, Jarboe, Willicutt & Co. could hardly be expected to execute any further commissions for Mr. Whitmore.

"All right," exclaimed Vance, coolly; "you have deserted the ship just a moment too soon for your own good, Mr. Jarboe. I'm only a boy, it is true, but I'm not taking off my hat to you after that."

Thrusting the letter in his pocket, he put on his hat again.

"I'll be back in half an hour," he said to Bessie.

He rushed over to the Grand Pacific and sent his card up to William Bradhurst.

"Read that," he said to his new friend, handing him Mr. Jarboe's letter.

Mr. Bradhurst had finished breakfast, and was preparing to go over to Mr. Whitmore's office according to arrangements entered into the night before.

"Cool. I must say," he remarked, as he handed it back. "Well, what are you going to do?"

"Get another broker," replied Vance decidedly.

"Quite right. Have you selected one yet?"

"I have a firm in my eye. It's young, but I know them both. They're square as a die. This deal will be the making of them, and I'm glad to put it in their way. Come, let us go over to their office. We haven't any time to lose to-day."

Mr. Bradhurst and Vance went to a brokerage office on La Salle street.

It was on the third floor front, and the sign on the door read Fox & Mason.

"Hello, Thornton," was Mr. Fox's greeting as the boy entered his private office with his friend. "Glad to see you. Where've you been for the last two weeks, and may I ask how your employer, Mr. Whitmore, is this morning?"

"I've been out of town. As to Mr. Whitmore, the latest

reports are not encouraging. Allow me to introduce you to Mr. William Bradhurst."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Bradhurst," said Fox, genially.

"Now, Mr. Fox, I wish your earnest attention. I'm going to put a good thing in your way," said the boy in a business-like tone.

"Thanks. All favors thankfully accepted," and he looked at Mr. Bradhurst as if he judged he was the good thing suggested.

"Read this," said Vance, and he handed him the paper which authorized him to act for Mr. Whitmore.

Mr. Fox read it with some surprise.

"Now read this," and Vance produced Mr. Jarboe's letter.

"Phew!" was the broker's comment after he had perused it.

"Under those circumstances I have decided to employ new brokers. I have selected Fox & Mason. Mr. Jarboe has made a slight miscalculation. Instead of having no money, I have a backing representing \$11,000,000."

"What's that? Say that again, please!" ejaculated Fox in amazement.

Vance repeated the amount.

"Say, you're not joking, are you?" said Fox with a smile.

"Never more serious in my life," replied the boy earnestly. "This gentleman, William Bradhurst, is worth exactly that sum, and he is backing me. He is ready to give you a check on the Bankers' National Bank now to cover my first transaction, which is an order to purchase any part of five million bushels of corn as soon as it is offered in the pit this morning."

"Five million bushels!" exclaimed Fox, staring hard at Vance.

"That's what I said. Please call up the Bankers' National on your 'phone and verify my statement. Don't lose a minute, please."

Jack Fox, still somewhat bewildered by such an order, did as Vance requested him, and returned to his desk perfectly satisfied with the result.

"Now we'll get down to business," he said.

And they did.

"After the close of the board to-day come to Mr. Whitmore's office, and you will find Mr. Bradhurst and myself on deck. I will then go over certain plans I have in view and make clearer our future business relations."

Vance and his friend then left, while Fox, after leaving a note for his partner, seized his hat and made straight for the Board of Trade.

It was twenty minutes past nine when Vance's broker entered the board room.

The gong which started business would sound in ten minutes, and already the floor was filling up, while groups in earnest consultation were to be seen on the steps of both the wheat and corn pits.

Sid Carrington and Abe Palmer were standing aloof on the steps of the latter.

A triumphant smile played about the mouths of each of these bear operators.

For weeks they had been laying their plans, joining together subtle schemes for the overthrow of Jared Whitmore, but they had made but little way against the acute old fox, who had been gradually drawing together his control of the corn market.

Now the one man they had feared—the man who stood like a stone wall between them and the accomplishment of all their carefully conceived plans—had been suddenly put out of the fight.

Their chance had come at last, and they did not intend to do a thing with the corn market that morning.

Everybody interested was talking about the sudden misfortune which had occurred to Jared Whitmore, and not one but felt sure that one of the biggest slumps in the history of the board was about to set in.

Consequently there was a subdued feeling of excitement in the air.

Brokers with their pockets crammed with selling orders constantly came on the floor, adding to the din.

Eyes were cast frequently and nervously at the clock, noting the slow crawling of the minute hand toward the half-hour mark.

Representatives from Jarboe, Willicutt & Co. were ready to sell the minute the gong opened proceedings.

Apparently all bulls had sought cover on this fateful morning.

From the Western Union desks, located in a great railed-in space in the northwest angle of the floor, came an incessant ticking of the telegraph sounders, and messenger boys pushed their way hither and thither across the floor with yellow envelopes in their hands.

From the telephone alcoves sounded the almost continuous ringing of the call bells.

Suddenly, with startling distinctness, came the single stroke of a great gong.

Instantly, with a strident roar, the battle was on.

Corn in lots of five thousand was offered at once at half a point below the previous day's figures.

Not at first by Carrington and Palmer—they were holding back, like men whose positions were unassailable.

The attack on corn was begun by the smaller fry, from the outposts, as it were, of the bear army.

Carrington and Palmer were holding their immense forces in reserve for the real attack that was to carry everything down before the onslaught.

But the first real surprise developed at once.

Jack Fox, one of the new traders on the board, accepted every bid offered.

He was immediately the center of a furious vortex that hurled corn in a flood at his head.

But with a confident smile on his face, that soon began to be noted with some uneasiness by cautious brokers, he welcomed the rush with open arms.

The result was that the grain began to recover and present a bold front to the bears.

"What in thunder does this mean?" growled Abe Palmer to his partner.

"Some fool has lost his head; that's all," sneered Carrington.

"We'd better get in and send him where he belongs—to the asylum," said Palmer with a menacing toss of the head.

Then Palmer and Carrington took a hand, and the excitement grew to fever heat.

In spite of it all, Jack Fox, calm and serene amid the babel and confusion, stood firm, and welcomed all selling orders as he would a much-loved relative.

Around and around the pit went the question: Who is Fox buying for?

Nobody could guess.

Suddenly there dawned the suspicion that Jared Whitmore was still in the fight.

It must be so.

Who else could be loading up in the face of such adverse conditions?

But the most astonished of all men were Jarboe and Willicutt as the telephone conveyed the astounding intelligence to their offices.

Already their representatives had, according to orders, sold a million bushels of grain they did not own, but hoped to be able to get later on at a low rate. Jack Fox was the buyer of this lot.

Some one had clearly come to Mr. Whitmore's rescue.

It apparently was some one able to resist the great bear clique.

He must have recovered in time to furnish Vance Thornton with the sinews of war to carry on the fight until he could get down himself.

If this was true, then Jarboe, Willicutt & Co. had made a big blunder.

Not only had they placed themselves in a bad light with their old client, but they were liable to face a big loss, since they knew only too well that if the Whitmore forces were still back of the fight they stood a poor chance of getting any corn when they wanted it.

So Jarboe hastened to try and square himself.

He made a personal call on Vance.

"I received your letter," said the boy coldly when the big broker had been admitted to Mr. Whitmore's sanctum, where Vance now ruled supreme. "The only thing for me to do was to hire a new broker. I have done so. From the looks of things," he said, with a significant smile, "I still hold a grip on the market in spite of the Jarboe, Palmer & Carrington clique."

Bessie knocked at the door, then entered and laid a slip on the desk before Vance.

"I have bought over three million bushels this morning, and I am ready and anxious to take in every grain that may be offered."

"Great heavens, young man!" exclaimed Mr. Jarboe in utter amazement, "where have you got the money from to do this? Has Mr. Whitmore come to his senses and signed his balances over to you?"

"I am obliged to refuse you this information, Mr. Jarboe, as you have ceased of your own accord to represent me. All I can say is this: I am at the head of the deal from this on. I control all of Mr. Whitmore's holdings. I mean to control the price as he has done. No corn will be moved east that amounts to anything until I say the word. If you think you can beat me, Mr. Jarboe, sell a million short and see. Good-day."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SCHEME THAT DIDN'T WORK.

It had been a day of surprise on the Board of Trade.

Instead of the price of corn going on the toboggan it had closed a couple of points to the good when business ceased for the day.

Everybody was talking about the new factor that had entered the fight.

The newspapers were full of surmises and hints and rumors.

There was no doubt whatever that Mr. Whitmore was out of the running.

Every afternoon paper published an authentic bulletin of his condition, which was given out by reputable physicians as practically unchanged.

A clot of blood or a bone was pressing on his brain, and the chances that he would ever recover were extremely doubtful.

Reporters, however, began to nose out the fact that Vance Thornton, as Mr. Whitmore's representative, was the power that had made itself felt that day, and from present indications was likely to continue to dominate the market.

Already he had gathered in the greater part of the clique's five million bushels, which everybody now knew were stored in the elevators of Elevatorville.

At this rate he would soon have absolute control of corn.

But Jarrett, Palmer & Carrington were not beaten yet, by a long chalk.

All during the rest of the week corn was thrown at Jack Fox and accepted.

Every effort was made by the clique to overwhelm the young operator, but it failed.

The Sunday editions now hailed Vance Thornton as the coming corn king.

His picture was printed on the first page, and a copious account of his young life up to date was published in double-ledged type to increase its importance.

Thereafter Mr. Whitmore's office was filled day after day with eager traders anxious to gain his ear.

Nobody paid any attention whatever to the personality of William Bradhurst, who studiously kept himself in the background and watched with the most profound interest and admiration the working out of the gigantic deal by his young friend.

"You're a wonder, Vance," he said to the boy one day as the two were getting ready to go to dinner. "A born speculator. Why, I haven't seen you ruffled a bit since you took hold of this thing."

"Yet it takes every minute of my time," replied Vance, with a smile that covered the weariness inseparable from the control of the tremendous forces latent in a line of fifty million bushels of corn.

"Necessarily," admitted the millionaire, "but, boy, you are stronger, bigger and shrewder than the great bear clique pitted against you. You've overtopped the whole crowd—the biggest men of the Board of Trade. A few days more will show the world that you are really the new corn Monte Christo. A few days more and these bears will wake up to the fact that the corn they have promised to deliver before they had it in hand is not to be got, except from you—and at the price you choose to impose. Jarrett, Palmer, Carrington, and others, not to speak of your dear friends, Jarboe, Willicutt & Co., will have to pay—or go bankrupt."

"Good gracious, Mr. Bradhurst! That can have only one meaning."

"Exactly. You will actually have cornered the product."

"I can't realize it," said Vance, pressing his hand to his head. "And yet that is the very point I have been aiming for. I am in it now up to my neck—both of us are. Were we beaten at this stage you would be absolutely ruined. And yet I have never for a moment seen you weaken when I called for million after million of your money. Do you actually realize to what extent I have involved you?"

"I do," replied William Bradhurst coolly. "But I entered this affair on the principle of the whole hog or none. To do otherwise was to invite disaster. No halfway measures will answer in a deal of this kind. You must risk all or better stay out."

"That's right. I fear that even Mr. Whitmore would never have succeeded in doing what we have done. We have half his capital at our back as it is."

"By the way, how is Mr. Whitmore now?"

"I believe he will recover after all. He was taken to a sanitarium a few days ago. He is a wreck at present, and it will be some time before he recovers his grip again, if he ever does."

"And that rascally bookkeeper that struck him down has not been arrested?"

"No. The police have not been able to locate his whereabouts. He may have fled to Canada. Probably he is hiding out in the wilderness somewhere."

"Possibly; but you can't tell. There are hiding places in this city where, by the aid of confederates, he could lie low in comparative safety. You know he was working in the interests of the Jarrett, Palmer & Carrington clique at the start, and but for you taking hold his crime would have proved of enormous advantage to them. Doesn't it strike you, then, that they haven't deserted him—that his immunity from arrest is largely due to their influence and pull with their political friends?"

"I didn't think of that," replied Vance thoughtfully. "Your idea is reasonable, I am bound to admit."

"Some day you may find I have hit the mark," said Bradhurst significantly.

That the millionaire was correct in his deduction Vance Thornton had reason to know ere many hours passed over his head.

While Bessie's admiration for Vance now increased daily as she saw how he controlled the vast business enterprise he had called into action, still, as he seemed to drift farther and farther away from her—for he had little time now to talk to her, except upon cold matters of business—her gentle, loving heart grew sore and despondent within her.

She felt that she had lost something that might never again be hers.

And the reflection grieved her to the depths of her nature.

Yet the morning and evening smile she daily bestowed on him was just as bright, just as winsome as ever.

Her sorrow was her own.

It was not for Vance to suspect what was passing in that true little heart.

Vance Thornton had returned from his lunch and was shut up in his private office, as usual.

In the last thirty-six hours corn had advanced three cents and the market was in a turmoil.

Bessie appeared at the door of the inner sanctum.

"There's an old man out here who wants to see you on business of importance. He wouldn't give his name."

"Very well; let him come in."

It was a noticeable fact that the pretty stenographer did not address the busy young operator as Vance any more; and the boy was too much preoccupied these days to observe the omission.

He was a curious character, the man who entered and stood humbly bowing to the young Napoleon of La Salle street, as many of the dailies called Vance in their scare-heads.

He was not exactly seedy, though he certainly was not well dressed.

He was bent over, as if like Atlas he had been condemned to carry the world on his shoulders, but had forgotten to bring it along on this occasion.

But he had extremely bright eyes, which belied his other marks of age, and they peered out in a restive manner from under a pair of heavy, beetling brows.

"Take a seat, sir," said Vance, pointing with his pen to a chair. "How can I serve you? Make your errand brief, for time with me is money."

"Do you want to buy any corn?" asked the venerable visitor in a shrill, squeaky voice.

"How much have you for sale?" asked the boy carelessly.

"Six million bushels."

"What!" ejaculated Vance, wheeling about in his chair and facing the old man.

"Six million bushels."

"Is this a dream? I have no time for nonsense," and Vance wondered if he was not up against a lunatic or a crank.

"You will find this no dream, but stern reality, Vance

Thornton," said his visitor in a familiar voice, sitting erect.

Tearing off his snow-white whiskers and pushing back his old sunburned felt hat, he sat revealed as Edgar Vyce.

It cannot be denied that the boy operator was thoroughly astounded at the rascal's audacity in thus venturing back on the scene of his crime.

But he recovered his presence of mind in a moment.

His fingers moved to one of the electric buttons on the end of his desk.

"Stop!" commanded Vyce, in a low, concentrated tone, raising one hand which held a brown, cylinder-like missile. "Move another inch and I'll blow you and your desk into La Salle street, and the wall with you."

Vance instinctively paused.

"That's right. I see you've got some common-sense," said Vyce grimly.

"What brought you here?" asked the boy, playing for time.

"Business?"

"Well?"

"You observe this cylinder? It contains a small stick of dynamite. If you do what I tell you it goes back into my pocket; if you refuse—the newspapers will have a new sensation, that's all."

"You seem to forget," said Vance, coolly, "that dynamite is like an overloaded shotgun—it works at both ends. If you drop that thing in this room there isn't a ghost of a chance for you to escape yourself."

"That needn't worry you," retorted the rascal angrily.

"What do you want of me, anyway?" asked the boy impatiently.

"I want you to sign that paper."

He pushed a document to Vance.

It was a delivery slip for six million bushels of corn, made out in favor of Sidney Carrington.

"So that's your game, is it?" said Vance Thornton slowly.

"Yes, sir; that's my game."

"Much obliged, Mr. Vyce. You've shown me the men who are at your back."

"Precious little good that will do you. You've got to sign that paper and swear to drop out of the market, or——" and Edgar Vyce made a significant movement with his arm.

"That's your ultimatum, is it?"

"That's what it is."

"Very well; I'll do neither."

"Are you mad?" exclaimed Vyce, furiously, feeling that the object of his visit was a failure.

"Not at all," replied the boy calmly, though every fibre of his body shook inwardly at the probable risk he was facing. "But do you fancy I would put myself into the power of any crank, not to say scoundrel like yourself, that chose to call and threaten me into doing something he wanted. Not on your life!"

"I don't see how you can help yourself!" sneered Vyce, eyeing him savagely.

"Look behind you and you will see."

Vance's tone and manner threw the villain off his guard an instant.

He started up in his chair and looked around, as though he expected some one stood behind him.

Before he realized the trap that had been sprung on him Vance had seized and wrenched the cylinder of pressed dynamite from his hand.

"Now, Edgar Vyce, you're my prisoner."

He drew a small revolver from his pocket and covered the scoundrel.

Fifteen minutes later Edgar Vyce was in the hands of the Chicago police, and ultimately he was tried, convicted and sent to the prison at Joliet for a long term.

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT SID CARRINGTON AND HIS PARTNER THOUGHT OF THE CORN SITUATION.

That same afternoon Abe Palmer and Sid Carrington were closeted together in their private office on La Salle street.

Business on the Board of Trade was over for the day.

The former held a copy of an afternoon paper in his hand.

"That bluff didn't work, I see, and Edgar Vyce is in jail," he said gloomily.

"I see he is. I took him for a cleverer man than that," replied Carrington, with a muttered curse. "However, we've got to get him clear somehow, or he's liable to blab, which would never do at all."

"I should say not. It would simply ruin us."

"It would for a fact. We would have to get out of business here for good and all. I'll see the leader of my district to-night."

"It looks as though we'll have to throw up our hands, anyway, Sid," said Palmer, with a moody glance at the decorated ceiling.

"Throw up nothing!" growled Carrington, with an impatient wave of his right hand, on the little finger of which glowed a valuable ruby ring.

"It's easy to say that," returned Abe, "but I don't see any chance of a turn. The pool is six million bushels short, and the market remains as stiff as a poker."

"Suppose it is. How can we tell but that this infernal young monkey, Vance Thornton, may be at the end of his tether also? It has taken an enormous amount of money for him to swing this deal. What I want to know is where did he get it?"

"That is what has bothered us right along. With all our sagacity and our pet spy system we have not been able to find out."

"No, we haven't. Who would ever have supposed that boy would turn out such a hard proposition?"

"He's a smart kid. He can't be more than eighteen. Why, it's my opinion he could give old Whitmore points in the business, as foxy as that old codger was."

"It goes against my grain to give in to that boy," said Carrington bitterly.

"Well, if you can see any way out of it I'll be glad to hear of it. The fact remains that it has become exceedingly difficult lately to get corn at all. Nobody seems to be selling. Why, to-day even the bulls were bidding against one another, with no sales under a full point advance."

"That's right," admitted the elegantly dressed Sid.

"When we sell the price will go down a bit, but the moment we try to recover there seems to be no corn for sale, and the market rebounds like a rubber ball."

"It certainly is rotten," replied Carrington, in a disgusted tone.

"There's only one thing I see to do," said Abe Palmer, in a confidential whisper.

"And that is?" asked Sid, eyeing him closely.

"To get out ourselves the easiest way we can and let the ring go to smash."

"Which means at the least calculation a loss of about half a million apiece, not to speak of going back on the bunch. If they should find out they'd never forgive us."

"We're not going to tell 'em. At any rate, if we're going to save anything from the wreck it'll have to be every man for himself; do you understand?"

"All right, Abe. I daresay you're right. That boy seems to have got us at last where the shoe pinches. But I hate to give up the fight."

"So do I; but if we hold on much longer we won't be able to get out at all, except on Thornton's own terms—and what they will be the Lord only knows. I don't believe he has any great love for either of us, especially you, since I understand he got on to the true inwardness of the Kansas City job you put up on him."

"If I'd only dreamed of what was coming I'd have pickled him for keeps that time," said Sid, smiting the arm of his chair savagely.

"You wouldn't have killed him, Sid?" the other said, aghast.

"Oh, no. I'm no murderer. But there are ways of putting a chap out of the way for a time that answer quite as well."

So it was arranged between these two gentlemen before they went home for the day that they should quietly begin to cover their own personal sales—their share of the six million bushels sold by the ring—without any reference to the obligations they owed their partners in distress.

Jarboe, Willicutt & Co., however, still hung on, hoping for a turn in the market at any moment.

Long ago they had clearly seen that it was not Jared Whitmore who was backing Vance Thornton.

As day by day Jack Fox, Vance's known representative, settled promptly for the corn he had bought, they wondered how long his resources would hold out.

Certainly there was a limit to everything in this world, and when Vance reached his, why then—at that stage of his reflections Mr. Jarboe always smiled grimly.

But as day succeeded day, that desirable point never seemed to be reached.

Thornton met all his engagements to the minute, and Jack Fox continued to wear the same confident smile he

had sported the morning he first went into the pit to buck against the bear traders.

The same thorn annoyed Mr. Jarboe that bothered the rest of the combination.

Where did Vance's money come from?

For good and sufficient reasons, insisted on by Thornton after the first week of their partnership, William Bradhurst had kept discreetly in the background, meeting Vance only when necessary, and then each time at a different rendezvous.

No one who saw Bradhurst lounging at times about the office door of the Grand Pacific Hotel would have suspected that impenetrable man had a dollar at stake in any precarious scheme.

Yet there were moments when he had reason to fear that even his eleven millions, now almost swallowed up in the insatiable maw of the corn market, would not be enough to stave off ultimate disaster.

But never for a moment did he lose confidence in the boy who was making such a shrewd fight against the combined bear interests of the Board of Trade.

Mr. Bradhurst had come to be a frequent visitor at the Thornton home, where he had been introduced by Vance the evening following their partnership arrangement.

Mrs. Thornton and Elsie received him with all the courtesy that well-bred people are wont to extend to a warm personal friend of the son of the family.

To a man who for eight years had been debarred from the ideals of civilization the pleasant home picture was restful and refreshing.

Possibly the lovely personality of Elsie Thornton had much to do with it.

At any rate, he found it agreeable to go there often.

"We see so little of Vance now," Elsie said to him one evening as they sat together in the pleasant sitting-room. "You can scarcely imagine how much mother and I miss him," and a tear-drop glistened in her eye.

"I presume you hold me largely responsible for this change in your domestic circle," said Bradhurst, with almost a feeling of remorse.

"No, Mr. Bradhurst, we do not hold you responsible," she answered, favoring him with such a bright glance that his blood quickened in his veins.

"And yet, by backing him in this enterprise I have actually kept him away from all the comforts of his home."

"We do not look at it in that way. Rather we are grateful to you for what you have done and are still doing for Vance."

"I am glad to see that you do not regard me as an undesirable factor in the case," said the millionaire in a tone of pleasure.

"No, indeed," she answered softly. "With his growing responsibilities Vance seems to have ceased to be a boy any longer. Not that we regret the change, but it would have pleased us better if the change had been more gradual."

"I can understand your feelings," said Bradhurst sympathetically. "But the end is almost in sight, Miss Elsie.

It seems to be only a question of a few days now when Vance's control of the corn market will be so complete that the whole country will recognize it."

"Isn't it wonderful to think what he has accomplished?" cried Elsie, enthusiastically. "Why every day the papers have something to say about him. This morning the Record referred to him as the 'young corn king.' Think of that!"

"And so he will be, I daresay, inside of forty-eight hours. Your brother has a wonderful head for speculative ventures. For that reason, and because I owe my life to his pluck and presence of mind, I decided to see him through, if it took the last dollar I possessed."

"You were very good—very generous! We can never thank you enough for the interest you have taken in Vance."

"I hope you won't let the matter worry you any, Miss Elsie," said Bradhurst, with a glance of unfeigned admiration for the girl.

She noticed the look and dropped her gaze to the carpet.

From that moment an increasing sympathy grew between the two.

Elsie recognized and was grateful for what Mr. Bradhurst was doing for her brother, whom she dearly loved, while the millionaire found a new pleasure in talking to and encouraging the lovely girl for whom he was beginning to feel a warm regard.

CHAPTER XVI.

A CORNER IN CORN.

It was a bright, sunny morning, thirty-six hours later, that William Bradhurst came downstairs and purchased the morning paper at the news-stand in the lobby of the Grand Pacific.

He opened it and cast his eye rapidly over the first page. A leading article arrested his attention.

It was headed "A Corner in Corn."

"By George!" he exclaimed, with no little excitement. "At last!"

On crowded La Salle street a few hours later everybody was talking about it.

There could no longer be any doubt that Vance Thornton, the Boy Corn King, had got hold of every bit of corn there was;

That he had actually cornered the visible supply.

That a mere boy could do this was simply astounding.

That he actually had done so was not now denied.

The news, fully verified, had by this time been wired all over America.

Vance Thornton's name was that morning on every business man's lips from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico.

Traders who must buy the grain to fulfil their contracts now began to call at Mr. Whitmore's office in the Rookery Building.

They inquired deferentially for the boy who held the market in his hand, and bowed to his mandate when he dictated the price.

Among the brokers who dropped in that morning was Mr. Jarboe, the dignified head of the firm of Jarboe, Willcutt & Co.

"I'll see him," said Vance when his name was handed in.

"Good-morning, Mr. Thornton," said the trader, as politely as his feelings would permit.

"Good-morning, Mr. Jarboe. What can I do for you?"

"The fact is, young man," answered the broker, hesitatingly, "we are short to you one million bushels at (here he named a figure) a bushel. I want to know how much it is going to cost us to get out of your corner."

To get out those words was worse than if he had to swallow a bitter pill.

Vance looked at him with a quizzical smile.

"It seems to me it would have been better for you if you had stuck by the sinking ship, Mr. Jarboe. You see, she was only waterlogged for the moment, and a golden pump put her on an even keel again."

"All men make mistakes," responded Mr. Jarboe abruptly. "What is the figure?"

"In consideration of your long connection with Mr. Whitmore," said Vance, "I'll let you off easy," and he named a price.

"Vance Thornton," said Mr. Jarboe, his dignity suddenly melting away, "you have acted like a man. Allow me to shake you by the hand and congratulate you on the wonderful ability you have displayed in engineering so gigantic a deal. I am proud to acknowledge your acquaintance, and I may say the same for my partners. Instead of crowing over a firm of solid old traders whom you have caught in the toils, and squeezing us badly, as you have the power to do, you have acted with the utmost fairness. Our loss is considerable, it is true, but no more than we deserve under the circumstances. The only favor I will ask of you is that you will keep this a secret. It would be a blow to Mr. Whitmore, who I understand is nearly recovered from his trouble, and expects soon to be back among us, if he should learn the true facts of the case."

"It shall go no further, Mr. Jarboe," Vance assured him.

"Thank you," and Mr. Jarboe took out his check-book and signed a check covering the sum due to Vance.

Then, with a bow and another handshake, he left the office.

It was closing-up time.

All the working force of the office had gone out but Miss Brown, who was adjusting her hat preparatory to her departure.

Vance appeared at his office door.

"Bessie," he said, "I'd like to see you."

She entered the private room, and stood before him in readiness to take any order he wished to give her.

It was not the old Bessie, but the new one, who always addressed Vance now as Mr. Thornton.

"Bessie," said Vance, taking both her hands suddenly in his, "aren't you glad?"

She looked at him in surprise, and then her gaze dropped.

"Aren't you glad it is all over?" he repeated eagerly,

in the old voice that seemed to come to her like an echo from the dead past.

"I don't know," she answered, in a trembling tone.

"You don't know?" he said, almost plaintively. "Don't you care?"

She half turned away from him, but Vance seized her by the shoulders and swung her back again.

"It is true that I'm not the same old Vance in some respects. I'm to-day the king of the corn market, and I'm worth several millions—just how many I can't say as yet. I went into this thing because it was my duty to try and save Mr. Whitmore's interests. If I've done more than that it was because once I took hold I couldn't let go. I had to stick to my post—sink or swim on the ultimate result. Well, I've come out ahead. The papers call me the Corn King, and they tell the truth. But Bessie," and tears came to his eyes as he spoke the words, "I'd give every dollar of my winnings—every cent I have made in this deal—to hear you call me Vance once more as you used to do, to know that you still think of me as you once did."

There was a pause, and then the girl gradually lifted her eyes to his face.

"Vance!" she said softly.

* * * * *

Before Mr. Whitmore returned to his office a well man again he heard enough about that famous corner in corn to feel assured that Vance Thornton was the smartest boy who ever walked in shoe leather.

The full particulars of the deal he learned as soon as he and Vance came together again, and the result was that the sign on the office door was altered to Whitmore & Thornton, and nobody was surprised when they saw it.

That fall there was a quiet wedding at the Thornton home, on which occasion Elsie Thornton became Mrs. William Bradhurst, and Vance was the best man.

Bessie Brown was among those present, and the pronounced attention she received and accepted with pleasure from Vance Thornton seemed to augur well for another wedding at no very distant day, when the sweet little stenographer might be expected to make happy for life the boy who had effected A CORNER IN CORN.

THE END.

Read "A GAME OF CHANCE; OR, THE BOY WHO WON OUT," which will be the next number (4) of "Fame and Fortune Weekly."

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